

EARTH MOTHER/MOTHER OF GOD

THE THEME OF FORGIVENESS

IN THE WORKS OF EUGENE O'NEILL

BY

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ABSTRACT

Although the works of the American playwright Eugene O'Neill (1888-1953) are marked by a strong religious concern, theological criticism, or criticism from the standpoint of religion and literature, has largely ignored his drama. The reasons for this oversight of the country's greatest dramatist on the part of this twentieth-century critical movement are to be found in the nature and treatment of his religious concern.

While only one play, Long Day's Journey into Night, is strictly autobiographical, virtually his entire work grows out of the author's personal experiences. The plays involve men who are on a quest, a quest which is seen variously but which always involves a spiritual need. Closer examination of the plays shows the close connection between women, mothers in particular, and the quest. Even those characters who are wives to the heroes are treated by them largely as mothers. Behind these women ultimately can be found another mother, Mary the Virgin Mother of God of O'Neill's rejected Catholicism. What the heroes desire is a restoration of the relationship they once knew with such a Holy Mother, a restoration that amounts to forgiveness. Because the author's own mother, a devout Irish Catholic who left the convent to marry O'Neill's father, was deemed to have failed him by virtue of her morphine addiction, the playwright appears to take his revenge on all women, in life as well as in his art. Because of this, the search for forgiveness before the mother fails, and the mother is rejected. Symbolic of the renunciation and of the continuing search for pardon is the way the hero

turns to other women: prostitutes. These prostitutes are often sage and even sexless, examples really of the Earth Mother. They, too, prove to hold no genuine pardon, no real consolation, for the heroes, and so the men must join those who had been better off had they never been born, the ones the author calls the Misbegotten: damned to live out lives they would rather not have lived at all.

Thus, what O'Neill offers for the contemplation of his viewers is an aesthetic world in which the only hope is to be found within the art itself. His faith had failed him, so only his art could save. It is this concept, salvation by art, that has kept theological criticism away. That it should not is evident from the validity of the artistic world he offers for contemplation, for it is a world not unlike the world of modern man, in which he seeks a forgiveness that is more than merely human, in a world where God is dead. Thus, the playwright offers for consideration a world that is not only his own personal world, but one that is utterly human, one that tells much of modern man's longing for forgiveness.

Chapter 1

O'NEILL AND THEOLOGICAL CRITICISM

Among the many developments in literary criticism in the twentieth century is the phenomenon of theological criticism, or criticism from the standpoint of the cross-discipline of religion and literature. Rising out of the necessity of dealing with a culture that had become largely secular, it attempts to understand that culture in and through its representative literature. While segments of the religious community have chosen to ignore modern literature, preferring to look upon it as stark evidence of the degeneration of society, with an accompanying loss of salvation, others chose to look at the art of the times no longer in any way as witness to traditional concepts of revealed religion, but in an effort to determine what that art says about man and his existence. While it could be said, with T. S. Eliot, that "We have tacitly assumed, for some centuries past, that there is no relation between literature and theology,"¹ it might also be said that criticism before this century was normally a kind of Christian criticism in a Christian milieu. Eliot prefers to call this a moral criticism, in which works were judged by the prevailing moral standards—which happened to be Christian. But whether viewed from the standpoint of moral or theological criticism, the rise of the present movement was certainly occasioned by the discrepancy between traditional theological ideas and

¹T. S. Eliot, "Religion and Literature," in his Selected Essays (London: Faber and Faber, 1934), p. 388.

a literature which is largely "god-less" in character. Such criticism sees as the most important, yet most difficult problem of literary criticism today this examination of "the relation of belief to criticism."² Before the present century, it was deemed sufficient to treat such literature--indeed any literature--as a means of showing man's condition, that is, his need of salvation. But such a treatment by way of preparatio evangelica could not honestly be applied to a literature that denied the gospel, that intended to say something about the life of man entirely apart from God, and that considered the gospel meaningless.

Historically, the starting point of the movement has usually been seen in the oft-reprinted article by Eliot, "Religion and Literature," which first appeared in 1932 in a volume of Eliot's collected essays. Eliot insisted on completing literary criticism "by criticism from a definite ethical and theological standpoint."³ He thus insisted upon the necessity of a religion and literature approach more than he actually defined it. Yet, it would be two decades before attempts would be made to define more precisely what theological criticism was about, and at that time Nathan A. Scott, Jr., the most prolific writer and editor in the field to date, wrote: "So, as we try today to discover what might be the first principles of a Christian poetic, it might be realized that we are breaking fresh ground and that for a time we must

²Roy W. Battenhouse, "The Relation of Theology to Literary Criticism," Journal of Bible and Religion, XIII, 1 (February 1945) reprinted in G. B. Tennyson and Edward E. Ericson, Jr. (eds.) Religion and Modern Literature (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), p. 85.

³Eliot, p. 388.

inevitably be groping somewhat in the dark."⁴

Since the time Scott made those first, tentative suggestions about the new discipline, theological criticism of literature has proliferated and has become an important facet of modern criticism. Most serious writers have come under the scrutiny of these critics, and many writers on the fringes of "serious" literature, such as Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., Ken Kesey, and even writers of purely popular works, as Mickey Spillane, have been the objects of this criticism. "The search for religious elements in literature, especially in American literature, has become a phenomenon in recent years that would have startled and bewildered Matthew Arnold, who did not have this sort of thing in mind at all."⁵

While this critical approach rose in part out of the decline of the Christian influence, there is another source for its origin. As with many such movements, it comes, in part at least, as a reaction to prevailing critical methods. Criticism faces a crisis today, with literary scholars discontented with criticism that has become too specialized and academic, that has limited its scope to categories, criteria and methodology.⁶ Especially New Criticism, that movement that insists chiefly on the treatment of a work of literature without regard to the biographical or cultural-societal context from which it arose, has seemed an end to

⁴Nathan A. Scott, Jr., Modern Literature and the Religious Frontier (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1958), p. 47.

⁵R. W. B. Lewis, "Hold on Hard to the Huckleberry Bushes," Sewanee Review, LXVII, 3 (Summer 1959), reprinted in Tennyson, p. 55.

⁶George A. Panichas (ed.) Mansions of the Spirit (New York: Hawthorne, 1967), pp. 12f.

criticism more than a proper beginning. It certainly limits the search for meaning in any literary work, and provides too few clues to the question of the truth of a work of art. "Any method of criticism which presupposes that meaning in literature is exclusively derived from the interrelations of words, or from the experiences of a self-enclosed mind . . . will be unable to confront religious themes in literature as such."⁷

But to suppose that there is a set method of theological criticism, with a strict methodology and precise formulae, is to misunderstand the purpose and mood of the movement. The very pluralism of the Churches, the independent ways of Christian thinkers, make it necessary to admit, along with Dorothy Sayers, that "we have no Christian aesthetic--no Christian philosophy of the Arts."⁸ Theological criticism is far from monolithic, as, for example, Marxist literary criticism tries very hard to be. It is, in fact, rather rich in its variety, within the framework of certain generally-held notions about literature and human experience.

What theological criticism does commonly insist upon is the religious character of literature--this is its raison d'être, after all. Of the modern age, and the literature that reflects it, Northrop Frye has written:

The resulting crisis of spirit is a far-reaching one. That it

⁷J. Hillis Miller, "Literature and Religion," in The Relations of Literary Study (New York: Modern Language Association, 1967), reprinted in Tennyson, p. 44.

⁸Dorothy Sayers, "Towards a Christian Aesthetic," in Nathan A. Scott, Jr. (ed.) The New Orpheus (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1964), p. 4.

has caused a political crisis goes without saying. But there is also a crisis in the arts and in the intellect. . . . But above all, the crisis is a religious one. The problems connected with the discontinuous and the absurd are problems affecting the way man lives his life, affecting his conceptions of his nature and destiny, affecting his sense of identity. They are, in short, existential problems. I feel that contemporary radicalism is deeply, even desperately, religious both in its anxieties and in its assertions: that it cannot, for the most part, accept the answers given to its questions by the existing religious bodies.⁹

The starting point for the movement is that "We live in an unbelieving age but one which is markedly and lopsidedly spiritual."¹⁰ It is not that any "special iconic materials" are sought, for vision and belief constitute the religious element in literature.¹¹ It is the belief of writers in theological criticism that, in this sense, the religious dimension is intrinsic to imaginative literature. Such concern with man's condition and hope has never really been absent from modern literature, for "All literature today which deals with the spiritual dimension (and how can it be left out?) must be a dialectical struggle between affirmation and denial, the divine and the human, the Absolute and Nothingness."¹²

The inherent danger in theological criticism is that the Christian message is used critically in the sense of a norm by which to judge the literature. Thus, Scott, together with many who have followed him

⁹Northrop Frye, Spiritus Mundi (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976), p. 35.

¹⁰Flannery O'Connor, Mystery and Manners (New York: Farrer, Strauss and Giroux, 1969), p. 159.

¹¹Scott, Modern Literature, p. 37.

¹²Charles I. Glicksberg, "Modern Literature and the Death of God," in Tennyson, p. 146.

in the field, often takes a modern theologian or philosopher to describe in theological-philosophical terms the ideas he finds in that literature. Thus, the literature is placed against a certain contemporary "norm" for purposes of criticism. Whether some contemporary philosopher, or the specific tenets of the critic's own faith might be used, even for purposes of a dialogue between the two, the danger exists of placing the literature under judgment of ideas quite foreign to it. Such a concern is expressed by Miller:

Even the best of the overtly Christian critics, Jacques Maritain, Allen Tate, or Thomas Gilby among the Catholics, Amos Wilder, Nathan Scott, or W. H. Auden among the Protestants, though they may respect the individuality of non-Christian works, tend to make criticism a dialogue between their own religious views and the world views of the writers they discuss.¹³

As long as theological criticism sees itself apart from the literature, and literature no longer as a mere department of religion, approaching it instead to discern what it says about life, the dialogue is possible, however vulnerable it might be. The difficulty confronting the critic is how to approach the question of literature and religion "without doing violence to one or the other. It is no longer possible to ferret out the 'message' of a literary work by reference to a catechism."¹⁴ There is always the need for the critic to be reminded of the "autonomy of the work of art"--no matter how much that smacks of the New Criticism the theological critic had abandoned.¹⁵ How the Christian tradition and the

¹³Miller, pp. 33f.

¹⁴Tennyson, p. 17.

¹⁵G. Ingli James, "The Autonomy of the Work of Art: Modern Criticism and the Christian Tradition," Sewanee Review, LXX, 2 (Spring 1962), reprinted in Scott, The New Orpheus, pp. 187-209.

integrity of the work of literature can both be honored is expressed well by Scott:

And this brings me to what ought to be the major focus in our time of any genuinely relevant theology of the imagination. For not only ought it to entail an effort to understand what will be involved in the collaboration between theology and the high forms of art, but it ought also to involve an effort to submit to the closest critical scrutiny all the archetypes and symbols and rhythms that animate our popular literature and movies and music. . . .

I am proposing, then, that the theological community may well conclude that something very fundamental awaits doing before it begins to put its shoulders to any wheel of radical and active reconstruction of the other-directed culture of our period. And I suspect that, increasingly, the best theological intelligence will be coming to regard the deepest cultural problem of our period as the problem of reshaping a life-style. But a life-style is something which has its deepest sources in the order of sensibility, in a style of imagination. And so, therefore, though the religious community must attempt to act in many other areas by way of rehumanizing the mass-situation of our period, I suspect that the chances of its doing something really constructive and redemptive will be greatly increased if it consents to begin by facing the question as to how the human imagination in a mass society may be renewed and reinvigorated. The exciting and difficult challenge that is presented to us by the human scene in our time is that of searching the cultural experience of the modern period and the rich resources of the Christian faith for the first principles of a theology of the imagination that will be prophetically relevant to a world awry.¹⁶

The purpose in this dialogue between theology and literature is to discover, out of whatever "ontological confusion" there might exist in the literature, the "sense of the ultimate meaning of existence upon the basis of which he still lives."¹⁷ It is this notion of "Ultimate Concern" which forms the basis of the movement of theological criticism. Its roots, indeed its ablest expression, are to be found in the works of the theologian Paul Tillich. Quite in contrast to the attitudes of many

¹⁶ Nathan A. Scott, Jr., The Broken Center (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966), pp. 196f.

¹⁷ Scott, Modern Literature, p. 64.

modern theologians--Karl Barth being the best-known example--Tillich would not abandon the culture of which the Christian finds himself to be a part, but would explore that culture, and the arts which serve as an expression of it, to determine that basic concern.

Pictures, poems, and music can become objects of theology, not from the point of view of their aesthetic forms, but from the point of view of their power of expressing some aspects of that which concerns us ultimately, in and through their aesthetic form.¹⁸

It is this ultimate concern that is sought out in the process of theological criticism. The "precedence and the primacy of the act" through which the writer examines experience and finds what to him is this ultimate concern "gives him then a perspective upon the flux and the flow."¹⁹ Whatever differences there might be in methodology, or even in the various traditions from which those who "do" theological criticism arise, the basic ground-rule is that their task is dictated by the very nature of the two disciplines they would bring together, religion and literature. "To sum up: Theology and imaginative literature will always have this in common: each is concerned with the nature and experience and destiny of man."²⁰ This, then, provides the basic methodology for working out the original proposition of T. S. Eliot: "Literary criticism should be completed by criticism from a definite ethical and theological standpoint."²¹

¹⁸Paul Tillich, Systematic Theology (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), I, 13.

¹⁹Scott, Modern Literature, p. 35.

²⁰Frederick V. Dillistone, "The Fall: Christian Truth and Literary Symbol," in Panichas, p. 152.

²¹Eliot, p. 388.

Even though certain Christian authors have been the object of theological criticism, the primary object of the movement has been the much more common literature of the period, which is mostly non-religious or even anti-religious. Western man has experienced a deep erosion of religious faith, a matter that could hardly let the Christian untouched, for even he, in a measure, "is himself in some sort a secular man."²² Consequently literature, if it is to be "an authentically contemporary literature, will inevitably be secular, and the world which it describes will be a world in which God appears in some way to have disappeared."²³ Eliot had earlier recognized this fact in modern literature, and noted too that not only was the bulk of literature being written by those who held no faith, but that they considered people who did continue to believe to be backward or eccentric. But if the literature was secular in the sense that God had disappeared from it altogether, it was also secular in the sense that the saecula was the setting for the literature: it was about man in the world.²⁴ There theological criticism could confront him honestly, since theology also has as its concern man in his human predicament. The difficulty of this situation was that literature tended to suffer from a sense of "depthlessness."²⁵ However, much of modern literature possesses not a "nothing-but" but a "more-than" char-

²²Nathan A. Scott, Jr., Negative Capability (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1969), p. 109.

²³Ibid.

²⁴Charles Moeller, "Religion and Literature: An Essay on Ways of Reading," in Panichas, p. 60.

²⁵Scott, The Broken Center, p. 185.

acter.²⁶ It is this negatively theological character that the theological critic grabs onto, that serves as the basis of the dialogue. Man is somehow possessed of a "hierophany": "That is to say, we crave assurances and manifestations that our world, for all its radical contingency, is nevertheless shot through and through with holiness, with a sacred reality."²⁷

This negative theological character is seen very clearly in Nietzsche's philosophy, who more than any other philosopher influenced Eugene O'Neill's works. Nietzsche pointed out that he was not the cause of the death of God, but only an observer of the fact. Like the playwright, although he rejected it, he was never entirely disassociated from Christianity.²⁸ Thus, the literature theological criticism criticizes can be interpreted from this standpoint because it has a theological character, although it is a negative theological character. "And it is this negatively theological character of modern literature that compels the critic to enter an essentially theological order of discourse and evaluation."²⁹

This raises the question of the nature of art, a question few would presume to answer, except at great length, and then, perhaps, at

²⁶Roger Hazelton, Ascending Flame, Descending Dove (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1975), p. 67.

²⁷Nathan A. Scott, Jr., The Wild Prayer of Longing (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971), p. xiii.

²⁸John E. Smith, "Nietzsche: The Conquest of the Tragic Through Art," in Nathan A. Scott, Jr. (ed.) The Tragic Vision and the Christian Faith (New York: Association Press, 1957), pp. 228f.

²⁹Scott, The Broken Center, pp. ix.

best only tentatively. But some suggestion as to its nature, at least as a working principle, is demanded by the nature of this inquiry. It must be said--and this all theological criticism holds firmly in its opposition to materialism--that art is necessary to man. "It would be better to think of the arts as, like physical exercise, a primary human need that has been smothered under false priorities."³⁰ Art is vital to human culture and vital also to the individual man, both viewer and artist. It is central to human experience and important to human well-being, as the study of basic types of literature shows.³¹ Scott writes:

Ours has been a time in which it has been generally supposed that the only responsible versions of experience that can be had are those afforded us by the empirical sciences and in which, therefore, the common impulse has been to trivialize the arts by regarding them as merely a kind of harmless play which, at best, is to be tolerated for the sedative effect that it has upon the nervous system. . . . So, in the last analysis, our culture has been incapable of finding for the arts, and especially for literature, a valuable or an irreplaceable function. And the result has been that the major strategists of modern criticism have felt it incumbent upon themselves to revindicate the poetic enterprise by doing what the culture was unable to do--namely, by seeking to define that unique and indispensable role in the human economy that is played by imaginative literature and that can be pre-empted by nothing else.³²

One starting point in an understanding of art is the element of creation. The "business of the literary artist is with the natural order of creation."³³ Art is new, that is, a creation. What the artist does is to create a world and then invite the viewer to enter that world for

³⁰Frye, p. 121.

³¹See especially Bruno Bettelheim, The Uses of Enchantment (New York: Knopf, 1976).

³²Scott, Modern Literature, pp. 23f.

³³Ibid., pp. 60f.

the purpose of contemplating it.

The aesthetic function--whether pre-artistic or artistic--creates images which are objects of aesthetic enjoyment. The enjoyment is based on the expressive power of an aesthetic creation even if the subject matter expressed is ugly or terrifying.³⁴

"Art, then, is disclosure. What is at stake in it is man's inveterate desire to shape the substance of his vision of the world for someone else to see."³⁵

To this world he has created, the artist not only invites, he entices. His art is a "calculated trap for meditation."³⁶ His language is thus not the language of communication, but the language of communion.³⁷

Essential to the theological interpretation of literature is the question of how honestly the imaginative portrayal depicts human experience. As the world the artist creates reflects human experience others can recognize, he has enticed them into the contemplation of life with meaning. Writing of the tragic mode, Martin Jarrett-Kerr states: "The banal conclusion is this: that tragedy will survive only so long as the artist does not work against the grain of common human nature . . . survive it will, so long as man is man."³⁸

³⁴Tillich, III, 257.

³⁵Roger Hazelton, A Theological Approach to Art (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1967), p. 20.

³⁶Denis de Rougemont, "Religion and the Mission of the Artist," in Scott, The New Orpheus, p. 63.

³⁷Allen Tate, The Forlorn Demon (Chicago: Regnery, 1953), pp. 12f.

³⁸Martin Jarrett-Kerr, "The Conditions of Tragedy," in Panichas, p. 134.

As the writer plumbs and expresses his "inscape,"³⁹ he points beyond it, and beyond the "depthlessness" that is the bane of most modern literature, to meaning and reality. Hence, theological criticism thereby creates an awareness of the religious nature of literature in an irreligious age; points up the Christian elements in non-Christian, even anti-Christian literature; and discerns what authors say of spiritual matters, however unaware of--or even opposed to--the spiritual strains in their artistic worlds.

Art becomes for the artist a way of viewing life. The artist does not conceive of art as separate from his existence, but so much a part of it that it becomes his way of looking at life. Before he might offer a created world for the contemplation of others, it is necessary for the artist to engage in purposeful contemplation of life, and the way he does so is through art. Life is seen as a kind of art-work, and what the artist creates is influenced by his understanding of the artistic qualities of life itself. His personal experiences become objects for the artist, providing the raw material out of which he creates.

The literary work is a trap, but it is a trap that is oriented toward the world of existence that transcends the work--and the work is oriented by the vision, by the belief, by the ultimate concern of which it is an incarnation; its orientation, that is to say, is essentially religious.⁴⁰

In such reflection, the artist employs form as he ultimately will in a work of art. Form is not to be understood as simple design or structure, but as a specific principle of the object of his contemplation.

³⁹ Scott, Negative Capability, p. 102.

⁴⁰ Scott, Modern Literature, p. 38.

Thus, the artist is enabled to see purpose in the object, and, through it, glimpse something of the meaning of life. For him, the art object is never just "art," but an extension and a result of this process of reflection. Life is a world of art to him, a world which he then tries to encapsulate in his own artistic efforts.

It is in the process of this creative endeavor that the close relationship between the artist and his artistic expression becomes evident. For, when he has viewed life and reflected upon it, through the eyes of an artist, he then expresses his understanding through the work of art. His art, if it is serious--and even the comic can be serious--expresses his deepest concerns. What he understands by life, having viewed it and thought on it with the eye and mind of the artist, is expressed in the art. It is shaped according to some artistic form, dictated both by the artist's capabilities and by the nature of the understanding of life it offers. Thus, for example, as the artist views one aspect of life (its conclusion), in one form, (what might commonly be called senseless destruction), his mind's eye chooses those details that point toward purpose. Reflecting on those events, he gathers the otherwise scattered details that, together, might suggest some purpose to the event that is not otherwise evident. Shaping these details through the traditional form of tragedy, the artist finally presents a world in which these events happen again, but this time without the senseless lack of purpose that causes men to call it "tragedy," when indeed the tragedy cannot really exist until the shaping of the aesthetic world can enable one to see the "why" of death that is otherwise without meaning.

Behind this is the presupposition that art is meaningful. It

is not to be understood as so much decoration, but as substance. This rejects the common modern notion of art, especially drama, as entertainment. "It is a minor aspect of the task to insist that art should not necessarily be viewed as only a pleasurable and indulgent matter."⁴¹ As an imaginative re-creation of human experience, the seriousness of drama grows out of the seriousness of life itself. In so far as it is a faithful representation of human experience--though not necessarily a purely realistic representation--it portrays meaning as surely as the events of life have in them the potential to be interpreted as meaningful. And modern literature, regardless of attitudes toward faith, has been remarkably honest in its depiction of human experience.

This, then, I am suggesting, may be regarded as a properly Christian understanding of the office and work of the poet: his vocation--and really it is a human vocation of us all, in so far as our native endowment of sensibility enables us to accept its burden--is to stare, to look at the created world, and to lure the rest of us into a similar act of contemplation.⁴²

It is such an invitation to contemplation that is offered in the plays of Eugene O'Neill. In the wealth of theological criticism that has arisen, however, there has been a surprising absence of criticism of America's foremost dramatist. Serious consideration of the dramatist has been limited to a very few pieces. It is almost as if the uncertainty expressed by Scott about O'Neill's stature in American literature--"The uncertain case of O'Neill"--were symbolic of the reluctance to examine the playwright from this standpoint.⁴³ But to take seriously O'Neill's

⁴¹ Amos Wilder, Theology and Modern Literature (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1958), p. 58.

⁴² Scott, Modern Literature, p. 52.

⁴³ Scott, The Broken Center, p. 217.

evaluation of his own writing, as well as a careful evaluation of its general contents, is to be confronted by the demands of a theological approach to the O'Neill corpus.

O'Neill insisted his plays possessed a religious quality. In a well-known statement, made to Joseph Wood Krutch, the playwright stated: "Most modern plays are concerned with the relation between man and man, but that does not interest me at all. I am interested only in the relation between man and God."⁴⁴ He saw his drama as an attempt to express and explore this dimension. He wrote, he claimed, of "the death of the old God and the failure of science and materialism to give any satisfying new one for the surviving primitive religious instinct to find a meaning for life in, and to comfort its fears of death with."⁴⁵ In the mid-twenties, O'Neill spoke of his writing as super-naturalistic. He always thought of himself as "primarily a religious playwright; not, of course, in the strict sense--" never demonstrating "the salvation of one creed--but in a wide sense, that what chiefly concerns him are ultimate transcendental phenomena."⁴⁶

Perhaps the strongest witness to the fact of O'Neill's concern for religious issues is to be found in the content of the plays. To the casual viewer, this might not seem to be so. Few of his plays, after all, are on strictly religious or biblical themes. Disavowals of spir-

⁴⁴Quoted in Arthur and Barbara Gelb, O'Neill (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), p. 382.

⁴⁵From a letter to George Jean Nathan, printed in the American Mercury, XVI (January 1929), 119.

⁴⁶Egil Törnqvist, A Drama of Souls (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1969), p. 11.

itual ideals are common to O'Neill characters. One would not be struck by the religious nature of his works. But there are levels of meaning in his writing, and it is when they are examined on a level other than purely realistic that this religious character of the plays becomes overwhelmingly evident.

. . . O'Neill's work is open to interpretation on different levels. Much of the controversy regarding its meaning and quality--and opinions have been, and are still, very divided on these issues--is clearly due to completely different ideas of what the author is trying to communicate. Some commentators have limited themselves to a consideration of the realistic surface layer or have read into the plays a topical meaning never intended by the dramatist. Others have been sensitive to the universal implications and super-naturalistic overtones of the dramas.⁴⁷

While for some time critics have recognized this "religious nature of all his effort,"⁴⁸ it is only recently, Törnqvist writes, "that scholars have begun to realize to what an extent O'Neill's oeuvre is permeated with religious allusions and symbols."⁴⁹ Joseph Wood Krutch summarizes this religious nature of the plays thus:

But the central assumption of O'Neill's plays has always been that the tameness and rationality of modern life is an illusion--that man is as much concerned as he ever was with the problem of his relation to God, and as much as ever victim of the darkest and most violent passions. . . . What neither philosophy nor religion any longer recognizes, becomes more than ever the proper subject of poetry and drama.⁵⁰

⁴⁷Ibid., p. 253.

⁴⁸Lionel Trilling, "Eugene O'Neill," New Republic, LXXXVIII (September 23, 1936), 177.

⁴⁹Egil Törnqvist, "Jesus and Judas: On Biblical Allusions in O'Neill's Plays," Etudes Anglaises, XXIV (January-March 1971), 41. Törnqvist strains at some, however, as the idea of the "dust o' the road" in Desire Under the Elms, which he sees as a reflection of Genesis 3:13f., and ignores others, as the greetings and benedictions in More Stately Mansions.

⁵⁰Joseph Wood Krutch, "O'Neill's Tragic Sense," American Scholar, XVI (Summer 1947), 286.

O'Neill was thus a playwright "of human depths--of experience for which terms like 'spiritual' and 'religious' become necessary because they are the only words adequately serious."⁵¹

To bring to these works of America's foremost dramatist the critical principles of the movement of theological criticism is a task that has been long overdue. Such attention is necessary not merely from the standpoint of the critical movement, but for the sake of furthering O'Neill studies.

In his drama, Eugene O'Neill reveals a very private world of his own sufferings. When he had completed a play, he had disclosed a portion of his own life, had even played the drama out on the stage of his own mind. He was little interested, therefore, in seeing any of his plays produced, after jealously guarding every word he had written from all attempts by actors and directors to alter the least bit of those, his personal creations, the private worlds he had chosen to display to the world.

While there is nothing unusual for the writer of fiction--novelist, short story writer or playwright--to find his material in his own experience, there have been few who have done so as completely as O'Neill. That his experiences depicted on the stage were "real-life" experiences was felt by drama critics very early in his career. In 1922, the man who was to become the symbol of criticism for much of the century, Edmund Wilson, noted that O'Neill "nearly always, with whatever crudeness, is expressing some real experience, some import directly from

⁵¹Lionel Basney, "Eugene O'Neill: Earthbound Aspiration," Christianity Today, XVIII (November 23, 1973), 17.

life."⁵² In his introduction to a recent volume of critical essays on the playwright, Ernest G. Griffin writes:

O'Neill was, above all, an experimental writer, translating experience, in the American naturalistic and realistic fashion, into many varieties of dramatic form. His best plays are so obviously "drawn from life" that it is tempting to confuse the "drama" of his life with the drama of his autobiographical plays. His personal career is indeed intriguing.⁵³

It is that simple fact, that the life from which O'Neill drew his real-life experiences was his own, that has meant the development of the fascinating study of the life-drama relationships in O'Neill scholarship. While Clifford Leech's warning is worthy of note as a constant caution in the study of any author's works, his affirmation of the nearly inseparable connection between life and works is in keeping with most O'Neill scholarship.

It will be evident that, more than with most writers, a knowledge of O'Neill's life and circumstances is necessary for an understanding of the varying shapes and qualities of his work. . . . And those who have discussed him most intimately have been so much under the influence of his personal impact that their writing has often acquired a melodramatic tinge. We do need to know the conditions of his life, so that we can see where memory has overburdened his work, why dissatisfaction is here or there provoked, but we need to see that work impersonally and dispassionately. Above all, we must be able to free ourselves from the sense of embarrassment that his recurrent self-pity induces, and we must get to the point of seeing his achievement as separate from whatever experiences went to its making.⁵⁴

Ultimately, the biographical data is inescapable in the case of Eugene

⁵²Quoted in Thomas F. Curley, "The Vulgarly of O'Neill," Commonweal, LXXXIII (January 14, 1960), p. 445.

⁵³Ernest G. Griffin, Eugene O'Neill (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1976), p. 3.

⁵⁴Clifford Leech, Eugene O'Neill (New York: Grove Press, 1963), pp. 2f.

O'Neill.

This relationship between art and life is somehow normative for the artist and necessary to his artistic expression. Perhaps it was from the one man who may have taught O'Neill more about his art than any other that he first learned this lesson. Nietzsche, in The Birth of Tragedy, which O'Neill found to be the most stimulating book on drama, wrote:

Only as the genius in the act of creation merges with the primal architect of the cosmos can he truly know something of the eternal essence of art. For in that condition he resembles the uncanny fairy tale image which is able to see itself by turning its eyes. He is at once subject and object, poet, actor, and audience.⁵⁵

Indeed, as the poet and critic W. H. Auden expressed it, a kind of relationship between life and written expression must exist for either the writing or the writer to be honest. In an essay, "Words and the Word," Auden argues that God is not object but person, and that God acts by authority, not by force or violence. If it can be said, as Christian theology has declared, that God is the Word and that "the Word became flesh," man is forbidden any pagan idolatry with words and men's words and lives must be in accord.⁵⁶ While O'Neill would not concern himself with the theology of this Christian critic, he would likely have approved the general tone and certainly the conclusion of Auden's essay. "Behind the genesis of O'Neill's plays was a great deal of living relived, and then released as art."⁵⁷

⁵⁵Friedrich Nietzsche, The Birth of Tragedy (Garden City: Doubleday, 1956), p. 42.

⁵⁶W. H. Auden, Secondary Worlds (New York: Random House, 1968), passim.

⁵⁷J. William Miller, Modern Playwrights at Work (London: French, 1968), p. 306.

With O'Neill, it was less a case of seeking material for his art than of expressing his life in his art. It was as if he had been compelled to express his experiences and use his art to understand the emotional significance of those experiences. "Throughout his creative life, O'Neill was to look at himself harder and harder until, to an astonishing degree, he changed his life into his art."⁵⁸ In a recent study of O'Neill's drama, Chabrowe states that ". . . perhaps a better slogan for O'Neill than art for art's sake would be art for life's sake. . . . Only art could turn doubt into will and despair into acceptance. Only art could release his pain of spirit and allow him to transcend himself."⁵⁹

There are obvious autobiographical elements in O'Neill's plays, and there are subtle autobiographical suggestions; these elements are all-pervasive.

In the thirty years of his creative life, he completed drafts of sixty-two plays. Eleven were destroyed, and of those remaining, over half contain discernible autobiographical elements. No play written by O'Neill after 1922, except for his fugitive adaptation of Coleridge's The Rime of the Ancient Mariner, was free of them.⁶⁰

Even in cases where O'Neill obviously borrowed from other sources, these materials were constantly shaped and altered by his own experiences. Characters and content might have been remote from the playwright's own experiences, but emotions and beliefs of the author reshaped the contents

⁵⁸Ibid., p. 282.

⁵⁹Leonard Chabrowe, Ritual and Pathos (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1976), p. xii.

⁶⁰Travis Bogard, Contour in Time (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), p. xii.

and re-created the characters in the author's own imagery, until they expressed yet another facet of his life. And this is all quite true in spite of objections and disavowels on the part of O'Neill himself.

The method O'Neill employed in translating his own experiences into his plays was hardly what could be called literal. With the sole exception of Long Day's Journey into Night (1940-41), O'Neill simply didn't write autobiography, and even in that play he uses sufficient telescoping and poetic license that the play should not be mistakenly viewed as mere narration of the events of the playwright's twenty-fourth summer. Rather, his use of his own life has been described as "unconscious autobiography."⁶¹ Robert Brustein, writing of The Iceman Cometh (1939), says that O'Neill is writing his "memories" not as personal autobiography--as Strindberg did--but in the manner of Ibsen's spiritual and psychological autobiography.⁶² Yet, even in the most personal expressions of one's experiences, when cast as fiction, these experiences are art, not biography. For "we immediately encounter an ambiguity which necessitates a qualification, namely, that autobiographical art is not literal autobiography."⁶³ O'Neill himself saw his writing as writing about life. In a personal criticism of drama critics, as expressed to a friend in 1933, O'Neill stated that he felt critics too commonly were so steeped in the theater that they reacted from that

⁶¹Ibid., p. 378.

⁶²Robert Brustein, The Theater of Revolt (Boston: Little, Brown, 1964), p. 339.

⁶³John Henry Raleigh, The Plays of Eugene O'Neill (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1965), p. 87.

standpoint and "not from insight of one living in life. They see the play first and life second--whereas I write first about life and then try to cram it into a play form."⁶⁴

Travis Bogard sees the nature of O'Neill's autobiographical writing not so much in the characters as in the shape of the drama itself.

As elements of works of art, the characters live for the most part independent of their creator; they stand in the round at an appropriate aesthetic distance. Yet the shape of the drama is formed by private matters. O'Neill's experiments with masks, asides, soliloquies and long monologues evolve from his necessity to make his personal quest a theatrical reality. The intense subjectivity of the plays, conflicting at times with the need theatre has for relatively objective delineations, accounts in part for the lyricism that emerges unexpectedly in many of his earlier works and toward the end of his life comes to dominate his stage. . . . The lyricism is a token of the fact that no other dramatist in the world's history, not even excepting Strindberg with whom O'Neill felt particularly allied, continually turned the theatre to such personal purposes.⁶⁵

His need in the plays was to express his own personal anxieties, to experience a catharsis of his own emotional sicknesses. While the idea of catharsis, from Aristotle on, has been viewed as what can happen in the lives of the audience, it was with the author that this need was even greater.

There is a cathartic quality in these plays, but the purging clearly was intended more for the author than for the audience: O'Neill was attempting to objectify by writing out of himself certain obsessive memories that long had haunted him.⁶⁶

In addition to the mere expression or venting of his emotions, there is

⁶⁴Louis Sheaffer, O'Neill, Son and Artist (Boston: Little, Brown, 1973), p. 88.

⁶⁵Bogard, p. xiii.

⁶⁶Edd Winfield Parks, "Eugene O'Neill's Quest," Tulane Drama Review, IV (Spring 1960), 103.

a certain sense in which O'Neill wrote to find meaning, "to find a pattern of explanation by which his life could be understood."⁶⁷

An autobiographer is an over-reacher. Much as wind and water leave traces of their passage on the surface of the land, an autobiographer seeks to shape a contour in time. He denies that his is like the lives of most men--a random sequence, jumbling instinctual action and chance into a drift of days. Disregarding the self-cancelling interplay of mastery and infirmity, he asserts that the course of his life is rational, and that, like the action of a drama, it moves toward a fulfillment in the complete understanding of its author-subject.

Eugene O'Neill's work as a playwright was such an effort at self-understanding.⁶⁸

The results were a kind of success. It is likely that, without the relief of his writing, O'Neill would have lived out a life of unsung tragedy. His writing "not only gave him a reason for being but enabled him to go on living."⁶⁹

But the ability of the author to know himself may not be completely served by the business of writing his story and expressing his feelings, even repeatedly. Oscar Cargill recognizes the problem of the validity of an author's own statements, especially in the light of modern criticism, when he says,

Modern criticism--or a highly vocal and influential segment of it--is but little impressed by a writer's avowals. Since the birth of the Unconscious, the Intentional Fallacy, and the Biographical Fallacy, it has become accepted doctrine that a writer cannot possibly know what his plays say or do not say about himself; nor does it matter.⁷⁰

⁶⁷Bogard, p. xii.

⁶⁸Ibid.

⁶⁹Ibid.

⁷⁰Oscar Cargill, N. Bryllion Fagin and William J. Fisher (eds.) O'Neill and His Plays (New York: New York University Press, 1961), p. 10.

O'Neill himself felt he was commonly misunderstood by the critics. He once told a friend, "I like to read what the reviewers find in my plays--things I never knew I had put there."⁷¹ That he wrote beyond his own understanding of his own problems was hinted at in correspondence with his New York dentist in 1929:

It's a funny coincidence. I had the idea (for the second play of the trilogy which began with Dynamo) all mapped out before there was any suggestion of a smash in my domestic life. It was quite objective. And yet now it would appear as most subjective and autobiographical because of the turn events have taken. A strange business! Maybe something inside me was doing a brilliant clair-voyant job.⁷²

There is no doubt that O'Neill's life-long struggle to understand himself and to find release from his emotional insecurities caused him to express his deepest feelings unconsciously in many instances in the plays. He was truly involved with his characters on both the conscious and unconscious levels as he struggled with problems similar to theirs. He "attempted to bridge the gulf between what we consciously acknowledge about ourselves and that world of feeling which continues a subterranean existence."⁷³ And this was his involvement with the plays: they strove toward solution of the problems of his own existence. "Everything in his life became significant because everything affected his plays."⁷⁴ The plays are autobiographical not because they tell the story of his life, but rather because they serve as a window on his soul,

⁷¹Sheaffer, p. 89.

⁷²Ibid., p. 402.

⁷³Krutch, p. 287.

⁷⁴Brooks Atkinson in the Introduction to Gelb, p. xix.

displaying his anxieties and his longings, however unsuccessfully they served to provide him with the needed solutions. Thus did O'Neill create his artistic world, filled with deep spiritual longings. The plays "seek not to express religious truth directly but to uncover the sources of religious emotion within ordinary experience."⁷⁵

The world O'Neill creates in his artistic efforts is one in which haunted heroes search for the experience of forgiveness. True to the remnants of his Catholicism, O'Neill could not let his characters approach God directly for that forgiveness; there was need for an intermediary. True also to the denial of his faith and the rejection of the idea of God, he could not depict characters with an obvious need for a divine forgiveness that he denied was a human necessity. Yet, the theme of the quest for forgiveness runs through the plays. In a basically amoral universe, where God is only an infinite, but--from the human viewpoint--meaningless energy,⁷⁶ this subtle quest for forgiveness is sought first from the images of the Mother of God, the Virgin Mary of his remembered childhood faith. Where that fails, as it inevitably does, the hero turns to the pagan counterpart of the Holy Mother, to seek forgiveness from the prostitute, the Earth Mother. There, too, the quest fails, and the O'Neill hero is left only the playwright's peculiar brand of nihilism, the curse of the misbegotten. Only as he watches himself, as his own voyeur, is he "saved from the impact of defeat by

⁷⁵Basney, p. 22.

⁷⁶Charles I. Glicksberg, The Sexual Revolution in Modern Literature (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1971), p. 81.

the knowledge of its ultimate meaninglessness."⁷⁷ The dramatist, for all his longings of the spirit, has found his only place of refuge in his art, in that world he himself has created.

It is to an understanding of that world created in the drama of Eugene O'Neill, and an evaluation of its validity as a picture of the human situation in which modern man finds itself, that this study is dedicated.

⁷⁷Edmond LaB. Cherbonnier, "Biblical Faith and the Idea of Tragedy," in Scott, The Tragic Vision, p. 39.

Chapter 2

THE FAILURE OF FAITH

The story of Eugene O'Neill--and the story of his drama--is the story of a lost faith. His life and his lines both portray the rejection of the institution, in his case his inherited Catholicism, but the greater rejection was that of a personal faith. Leaving the church was, for O'Neill, less a matter of turning away from something without than it was a matter of denying something within. As a child, he possessed a deep, utterly trusting faith. That faith suffered a devastating destruction that is witnessed in his personal life and in his works. Yet, while his is the story of a lost faith, it is at the same time that of a never-ending search to recapture that faith, or, perhaps more accurately, to find a satisfying substitute for its loss. It is this--the quest for the faith he renounced but so desperately needed to possess--that gives his plays their religious dimension. To understand the nature of this religious dimension, it is well to look at the background of his faith and his religious education, to see the depth of his early faith and the depth of his later denial.

O'Neill's Irish Catholic parentage was one of the most important of the influences to shape his career as a playwright. While it is true that his knowledge of his parental faith may not have been any greater than that of the typical Catholic of his day, he can hardly be accused of any kind of total innocence about it. Thus, the remark of Father Doyle, writing in the Jesuit periodical America, is something less than fair: "Just when O'Neill abandoned the Catholic religion is

not clear, but it could not have been long after his baptism. His ignorance of it is profound."¹ O'Neill was, in fact, long "preoccupied with Roman Catholicism."² His preoccupation, however, was not a matter of writing as a Catholic dramatist; he wrote, instead, as one who had moved out of the faith, had indeed rejected it. And his active writing life was a constant reaffirmation of that rejection.

Not that O'Neill is, or has ever been a Roman Catholic writer. On the contrary, he appears to have been all his life an ardent and variable heretic; but his plunges into the doctrines of Nietzsche, into atheism, anarchism, and scientific materialism, have had that restlessness and violence which do not spring from coldly rational intellect. What he is seeking, or from what he is fugitive, is as yet undetermined; but the heat of the quest and the flight affects his art for good and evil, and affects it more and more as he grows older, preserving in it a remarkable force of unpremeditation, of having been written with youthful blood, and, at the same time, giving to it sometimes an air of unselective, revivalist tub-thumping which might well prove intolerable if the authenticity of the impulses behind it were not understood.³

Eugene O'Neill's parents were in ways more seriously inclined toward their faith than the picture we receive from the playwright would seem to indicate. Long Day's Journey Into Night (1940-41), for example, would suggest that his father rarely practiced his faith. In reality, he seems to have been quite faithful in his obligations, considering his profession and its demands, on top of the lack of encouragement from his

¹Louis F. Doyle, "O'Neill Redivivus," America, DCVIII (November 2, 1957), 138.

²Helen Muchnic, "Circe's Swine: Plays by Gorky and O'Neill," Comparative Literature, III (Spring 1951), 128.

³"Mr. Eugene O'Neill: An Iconoclast in the Theater," reprinted from Times Literary Supplement (May 8, 1947), in Oscar Cargill, N. Bryllion Fagin and William J. Fisher (eds.) O'Neill and His Plays (New York: New York University Press, 1961), p. 360.

family. He had actually thought of becoming a priest,⁴ and even looked the part; he was so often mistaken for one that it became a family joke.⁵ O'Neill himself must have remembered that family joke when, years later, leaving the United States with Carlotta, he traveled under the pseudonym of "Reverend William J. O'Brien."⁶ His mother, whose own deep religious wishes and frustrated youthful desire to become a nun are so well known, had wished that her youngest son might become a priest.

For all her habitual reticence Ella would be almost voluble about the fulfillment of life under orders, a subject she frequently brought up on talking to Eugene, for she was trying to plant in him the thought of entering the priesthood. Ella probably was concerned not only with the special grace that would enter his life but, if unconsciously, with her own salvation; by giving her son to Jesus, she hoped to expiate some of her guilt and gain new strength to conquer her addiction. More than once she told Mrs. Kiley, a neighbor in New London, that she hoped Eugene would become a priest. Far from ever fulfilling her dream, he broke away from the Church at an early age, when around fifteen; but though his mother failed in her objective, she helped foster in him a sense of commitment that, unfulfilled, was to haunt him all his life.⁷

While O'Neill was to rebel against the church, the rebellion really came about first as a rebellion against the educational system of the church. It was here that O'Neill received his foundation in the faith he was to deny, and it was here that the beginnings of his denial took place. Attending Catholic boarding schools meant being apart from his parents, and this very separation caused him to fear and distrust his

⁴Croswell Bowen, The Curse of the Misbegotten (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1959), p. 9.

⁵Doris Alexander, The Tempering of Eugene O'Neill (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1961), p. 47.

⁶Ibid., p. 48.

⁷Louis Sheaffer, O'Neill, Son and Artist (Boston: Little, Brown, 1973), p. 70.

surroundings. When he was first enrolled at Mount Saint Vincent,

He was taken there and left--a shy, bewildered boy who felt lost and frightened among the strange children and the alien, black-robed women, so terribly unlike his beautiful mother. And he was left, not for a few hours, but for days and weeks and months, which were filled with the anguish of loneliness and with yearning for Mama, for Papa, for the familiar presences that made up his universe. The hurt went deep. He felt that he had been betrayed, cheated; that those he trusted most had senselessly, cruelly rejected him.⁸

The children were not permitted to leave the school except for the holidays, and since his father was often on the road, and his mother either with her husband or, occasionally, in a sanitarium, even these brief reunions with his family were often denied him. Christmas, especially, became a season of dread for him, a dread which remained with him the rest of his life.⁹ Minor occurrences fed his sense of distrust and rebellion. At the age of twelve, he was forbidden the privilege of attending a stage production in New York which starred his father, and the following morning was also refused communion because he had desired to attend the theater, something looked down upon with great disdain in Catholicism of that day. His father's profession, in fact, was apparently often a cause of growing alienation from the faith now represented by his teachers.¹⁰ At the same time, he was "both starting to question his ancestral faith, and unnerved by the feeling this gave him of being adrift, trying with renewed fervor to believe in a benevolent, omnipotent God."¹¹ Earlier, when he was only nine, he said to his roommate,

⁸Alexander, pp. 23f.

⁹Sheaffer, p. 71.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 76.

¹¹Ibid.

"Religion is so cold."¹² In the context of the parochial boarding school, he found the vague notion of the presence of a loving God a totally inadequate substitute for the real presence of his parents, and especially his mother. The anguish that was breeding in his life was a thing kept to himself, there to thrive on itself, for his schoolmates were apparently quite unaware of the turmoil in his spirit.¹³ It is likely that by the time of his first Communion, in 1900, he had all but deserted the struggle to find satisfaction within the church. Events of the ensuing years were to destroy the possibility that he might ever find it.

By age fifteen, O'Neill's formal rejection of the church was quite complete. During summer vacation that year, physically resisting his father's command to attend Mass with him, Eugene stopped attending church altogether.¹⁴ This came in a period in which he suffered agonizing discoveries. He learned that his father had sired an illegitimate child. He recognized that his brother was well on his way to becoming an alcoholic. And--most crushing of all discoveries--he learned that his mother was an addict. He placed his last bit of hope on the possibility of her cure, and when that failed to become a reality, he was through with hopes and prayers and the faith.

Nearly fifteen when he first learned of her addiction, Eugene felt shattered, particularly since her "curse," as the family alluded to it, had begun with his birth. Formerly quiet and well

¹²Arthur and Barbara Gelb, O'Neill (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), p. 69.

¹³Sheaffer, p. 69.

¹⁴Gelb, p. 73.

behaved, now burdened with a crushing sense of guilt, he began turning into a rebel, openly defiant. His faith in the divine scheme of things destroyed (if God were benevolent, how could He allow his pious mother to fall?), the youth rejected Catholicism and all other orthodoxies.¹⁵

The remainder of O'Neill's life was a succession of denials of the faith, together with a never-ending search for a replacement for it. His next schooling was at Betts Academy in Connecticut, a nonsectarian school, where

. . . he was struggling not only to grow up, but, since nature abhors a vacuum, to fill the void left by his apostasy. After the loss of faith in his mother and in Catholicism (He tended unconsciously to equate her with Catholicism, just as he equated his father with the Irish), he was launched on a lifelong quest for something to believe in.¹⁶

Perhaps the playwright expressed it even better himself, in the feelings of his hero (John) and the hero's alter ego (Loving) in Days Without End (1931-4).

LOVING: So the poor fool prayed and prayed and vowed his life to piety and good works! But he began to make a condition now--if his mother were spared to him!

JOHN: Finally he knew in his heart she was going to die. But even then he hoped and prayed for a miracle.

LOVING: He abased and humbled himself before the Cross--and in reward for his sickening humiliation, saw that no miracle would happen.

JOHN: Something snapped in him then.

LOVING: (his voice suddenly takes on a tone of bitter hatred) He saw his God as deaf and blind and merciless--a Diety Who returned hate for love and revenged himself upon those who trusted Him!

JOHN: His mother died. And in a frenzy of insane grief--

LOVING: No! In his awakened pride he cursed his God and denied Him, and, in revenge, promised his soul to

¹⁵Louis Sheaffer, O'Neill, Son and Artist (Boston: Little, Brown, 1973), p. x.

¹⁶Sheaffer, Son and Playwright, p. 94.

the Devil--on his knees, when every one thought he was praying!¹⁷

O'Neill seemed to lose no opportunity to deny, in word of mouth or action, the faith he had rejected. In his abortive year at Princeton, he resented the obligation to attend chapel. In a letter to his parents from the Honduras, where he was sent to forget his first marriage while prospecting for gold, he wrote his parents tauntingly not to worry, since "The devil takes care of his own."¹⁸ Clare O'Rourke, a nun at the Gaylord Sanitarium when O'Neill was there for treatment, got the feeling that he was rejecting not just the church, but everything.¹⁹ His choice in poetry usually tended toward writers like Swinburne, whose "The Garden of Proserpine" was one of O'Neill's favorites. In one of his own poems, "Fratricide," he censured a nation responding to the threat of war, in which an underlying greed would be made into a holy war, blessed by the churches.

Their shepherds bless them as they wait
 With unctuous platitudes inane.
 With words of God instilling hate
 They slink off calling on his name
 To polish the collection plate
 (For Christ was crucified in vain).²⁰

¹⁷Eugene O'Neill, Days Without End, in The Plays of Eugene O'Neill (New York: Random House, 1954), III, 511. With the exception of many of the short plays from O'Neill's early career, and the later plays (after The Iceman Cometh), all quotations will be from the above and will hereafter be designated by Plays and cited by act (and scene), volume and page number.

¹⁸Sheaffer, Son and Playwright, p. 151.

¹⁹Ibid., p. 247.

²⁰"Fratricide," New York Call (May 17, 1914), reprinted in Ralph Sanborn and Barrett H. Clark (eds.) A Bibliography of the Works of Eugene O'Neill together with The Collected Poems of Eugene O'Neill (New York: Blom, 1965), p. 115.

His severest criticisms were always leveled at Catholicism (and often attended by praise for socialism and anarchy).²¹ He considered the Catholic Church as a "tool of oppression that kept the masses servile by means of a mixture of superstitious fear and idolatry."²² But Christianity as a whole came in for its share of his vituperation. Organized religion had perverted the simple truths of the great founders. "The church in our world has no relationship to Christianity. The church is a fraud."²³ He wrote, in an explanation of The Great God Brown (1925), that "Christianity, once heroic in martyrs for its intense faith, now is pleading weakly for intense belief in anything, even Godhead itself."²⁴ He seemed to feel that religion was implanted by parents, teachers and priests, so that the adult could not shake off what had been implanted in the child.²⁵ It was his fruitless quest, apparently, that caused much of his bitterness toward religion. In declining an invitation to contribute to a volume of "Living Philosophies," he explained that he couldn't write such an essay

. . . Unless I had something positive to offer--and there is nothing. Beyond what intuitions or glimmerings of insight may be, in my plays, I don't know a single final answer as a result of my own questioning, and I cannot believe any of the answers that are faiths to others.²⁶

²¹Sheaffer, Son and Playwright, p. 234.

²²Alexander, p. 73.

²³Sheaffer, Son and Artist, p. 552.

²⁴Quoted in Walter J. Meserve, Discussions of American Drama (Boston: Heath, 1965), p. 130.

²⁵Sheaffer, Son and Playwright, p. 300.

²⁶Sheaffer, Son and Artist, p. 476.

O'Neill had company in his unbelief. For some time, his close companion Terry Carlin shared the void created by his lost Catholicism. Carlin described his own family after their arrival in America as "Catholics on the surface" but "pagans at bottom."²⁷ And there was always O'Neill's brother Jamie, ten years his senior, who introduced Eugene to and encouraged him in the pursuit of prostitutes and the flight from labor, and shared with him his unbelief.

O'Neill attacked both the Catholicism of his parents--and that of the nuns in the schools he had attended--and the prevailing religious spirit of the New England he knew so well, Puritanism. But his rejection and his criticisms ran much deeper than the prevailing mores and the uncomprehending devotion to ritual he saw in the faith of people about him. He was a part of that incipient trend which would, in the decade after his death, flower into the peculiar philosophy of the Death of God movement. O'Neill was a part of that literary milieu which assumed the demise of God before theologians thought to pronounce him dead. In typical cynic's fashion, he once dared God to strike him dead. He claimed to be an agnostic, not an atheist, however, for he recognized man's inability to comprehend infinity, and supposed that there could

²⁷Gelb, p. 289. But Carlin seemed to share the same questing attitude that O'Neill shows, for he once wrote, "There must be some meaning for all this ancient agony. Oh, that I might expand my written words into an Epic of the Slums, unto an Iliad of the Proletaire! If any oyster can turn its pain into a pearl, then, verily, when we have suffered enough, something must arise out of our torture--else the world has no meaning. . . . It cannot be that I came up out of the depths for nothing. If I could pierce my heart and write red lines, I might perhaps tell the truth. But only a High Silence meets me, and I do not understand. . . . I feel like a diver who has high strangled himself to bring up a handful of seaweed, and so feels he must go down again--and again--until he attains somewhere the holy meaning of Life."

well be something beyond the human mind--even God.²⁸ But in Marco Millions, he called God "an infinite, insane energy which created and destroys without other purpose than to pass eternity in avoiding thought."²⁹

If O'Neill was concerned only with relations between man and "God,"--that God was not He Whose fatherhood makes all men brothers but the God (or demon) within each individual, a God who isolates, not a God who unites."³⁰

While the playwright possessed a strong sense of man as a worshipping being, he had "an equally strong sense of all the powers of skepticism and negation that cut man off from visions of salvation."³¹ He counted himself the modern man, and that man, he said, had no religion with which to evade life. "So we must face life as it is, within ourselves, and do it with joy, and get enthusiasm from it. . . . And it is a difficult thing to get exultance from modern life."³²

It was Nietzsche who had taught O'Neill of the death of God. And it was the playwright's understanding of science that served as the underlying philosophical basis for the idea of denial. Gabriel Vahanian writes of this turn-of-the-century development that undoubtedly describes the thinking of O'Neill:

²⁸Ibid., p. 114.

²⁹Act III, Scene 1, Plays, II, 426.

³⁰Thomas F. Curley, "The Vulgarly of O'Neill," Commonweal, LXXXIII (January 14, 1960), pp. 445f.

³¹Robert Bechtold Heilman, The Iceman, the Arsonist, and the Troubled Agent (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1973), p. 94, footnote.

³²Gelb, pp. 520f.

The turning point occurred at the moment when the post-Christian era began. This turning point was brought about by science; it was not what science sought, but it soon became what science had brought to light. Its characteristic was that while science could neither prove nor disprove the existence of God, it attempted to explain the universe as a self-contained entity without necessarily having recourse to extraneous sources of meaning such as God. In a parallel way, man was no longer seen as owing allegiance to God in order to understand himself; the religious mode of self-knowledge, although authentic, no longer constituted the only authentic avenue.³³

With science, with its demand for new gods in the background, and, in the foreground, Nietzsche, with his epitaph for the old god, O'Neill became a member of that generation which denied God and lived to write about it. As one of the "iconoclastic figures" of his generation, O'Neill not only helped set the stage for the later sexual revolution of the present generation,³⁴ but became a part of the whole cultural evolution that would eventually transfigure the world and man's situation in it--the true iconoclasm. It is out of this, and in large part as a realization of what has happened in civilization because of this iconoclasm that the modern Death of God movement arose.³⁵

So the denial of faith became a theme in the plays of Eugene O'Neill. These denials span the works to one of the latest plays, where, in Long Day's Journey (1940-41), Edmund, almost with gentleness, reaffirms Nietzsche's God is Dead philosophy; but the denials begin with the earliest plays he wrote. In one of those first efforts, The Sniper

³³Gabriel Vahanian, The Death of God (New York: Braziller, 1961), p. 175.

³⁴Charles I. Glicksberg, The Sexual Revolution in Modern American Literature (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1971), p. 4.

³⁵Gabriel Vahanian, Wait Without Idols (New York: Braziller, 1964), chapter 1, "Iconoclasm and Transfiguration," pp. 19-46.

(1914-15), he writes of the Prussian invasion of Belgium. The sniper is an elderly peasant whose son has been killed by the invaders. When he learns that his wife has also been shot, he fires on the soldiers and is himself shot down on the order of one of their officers. The old man is executed after refusing the ministrations of a priest.

CAPTAIN: (To the soldier) Las den Priester gehen! (The soldier releases the PRIEST. The CAPTAIN turns to ROUGON) If you have a prayer to say, be quick! (The four soldiers line up in front of ROUGON and face him across the body of CHARLES [his son])
 ROUGON: (With angry scorn) I want no prayers!
 PRIEST: Rougon!
 ROUGON: (Furiously) To hell with your prayers!
 PRIEST: (Supplicatingly) Make your peace with God, my son!
 ROUGON: (Spitting on the floor, fiercely) That for your God who allows such things to happen!³⁶

In certain of the plays, the denial is much more in earnest. Marco Millions (1923-25), like others of the plays of the mid-twenties, has a strongly anti-Christian bias. The first words of the Christian traveler in Persia, the words that open the play, are a complaint about the weather: "Phoo! . . . Hot as hell!"³⁷ When the Buddhist and the Magian recognize him from a previous encounter, the Magian reminds him that he was drunk that time, and the Buddhist remembers that he danced and sang lewd songs that night. The Christian admits: "Humm--oh, yes--I remember. It was my birthday and I'd taken a drop too much--a very unusual thing for me."³⁸ As the Christian makes a comment moments later, the Buddhist cuts his words off short, so that the Christian is

³⁶Eugene O'Neill, Ten "Lost" Plays (New York: Random House, 1964), p. 207.

³⁷Prologue, Plays, II, 347.

³⁸Ibid., II, 348.

left saying "but I don't believe---"³⁹ When the father and uncle of Marco speak with a Buddhist merchant, he tells them of the Buddha, who was the Incarnation of God:

He was immaculately conceived. The Light passed into the womb of Maya, and she bore a son who, when he came to manhood, renounced wife and child, riches and power, and went out as a beggar on the roads to seek the supreme enlightenment which would conquer birth and death; and at last he attained the wisdom where all desire has ended and experienced the heaven of peace, Nirvana. And when he died he became a God again.⁴⁰

But Maffeo, Nicolo and Marco seem unaware that the Buddha was so much like the Christ. When the Venetian travelers seek the hundred wise men the Kaan had requested, that they might argue with his wise men, they face the difficulty of waiting for the election of a new Pope. Nicolo remarks, "Two years in session! . . . Well, it's a new world's record, anyway."⁴¹ The papacy in particular is treated by the Venetians, and the playwright, with contempt. When this request for the wise men is finally filled, it is not by the hundred the Kaan requested, but by Marco alone, who surely is worth not hundreds, but millions.

The Fountain (1921-22) follows Juan Ponce de Leon on his quest for the famed fountain of youth. There would be for Juan no need for a quest if he had not first rejected something. The spiritual nature of his search is brought about by the rejection of his faith.

O'Neill spent scene after scene developing the hypocrisy and avarice of the Christian Spaniards and their priests, indicating that their religion was a sham, that they worshiped only

³⁹Ibid., II, 349.

⁴⁰Act I, Scene 4, Plays, II, 372.

⁴¹Act I, Scene 2, Plays, II, 359.

gold, that they were blind to the original principles of Christianity--that God, in fact, was dead.⁴²

Juan is given to scorn, repeatedly scoffing at his old faith. He calls the Bishop "High Priest," impiously comparing the Indian Nano to Jesus. He admits all his prayers have been in vain and once says to his friend Luis, "I was praying--to what God, who knows?"⁴³ He accepts the accusation of Nano that "Your God is a God of lies," since his God has forsaken him anyway.⁴⁴ The Indians see the sham in the religion he has rejected. Nano insists that these men are not gods, that their god is a thing of the earth--gold. And they tell of the white man's god who was tortured by them and killed on a cross. In hopes that the white men will let them in peace, they imitate the Spaniard's "totem," planting a cross--but without success since they accidentally plant the cross upside down. What Juan finally finds to replace the faith he rejected is not the fountain of youth he so desperately sought, but a kind of pantheism. As representatives of several religions appear to him, he says, "All faiths--they vanish--are one and equal--within--"⁴⁵

It is in Days Without End (1931-34), however, that this rejection of faith is most carefully--and quite autobiographically--chronicled. The play itself presents to the viewer a quandary not unlike what the playwright must have struggled through in the long and arduous chore he had in writing it. The question it unintentionally poses is:

⁴²Gelb, p. 470.

⁴³Scene 8, Plays, I, 434.

⁴⁴Scene 5, Plays, I, 416.

⁴⁵Scene 10, Plays, I, 441.

What was the author trying to write? He certainly was trying to write a kind of biographical study of his own struggles of spirit. If some of the earlier plays might be called "unconscious autobiography" and a play like Long Day's Journey (1940-41) be termed "conscious autobiography," perhaps Days Without End could be called "semi-conscious autobiography." The very problem with its construction could be that O'Neill was too close to his subject. The problems---marital, spiritual, philosophical---about which he writes were apparently the materials of his daily life. The value of the play seems to be its insight into the soul of the playwright at this decisive juncture in his life. Whatever its value as theater, it will survive "for the peculiar light it sheds on its author."⁴⁶

There are many "patently autobiographical" elements in the play.⁴⁷ The characters are reminders of the personalities in the dramatist's own life. The priest, Father Baird, John's uncle and former guardian, reflects an almost ironic idealization of O'Neill's father, who was more of a guardian than a father to him. The elder O'Neill at one time played the Christus in a passion drama and, because of his stately bearing, was often mistaken for a priest. The name and saintly character of the wife, Elsa, remind one of Ella O'Neill. And John Loving, writer, lapsed Catholic, devoted husband, and a very divided personality, bears unmistakable resemblance to the playwright. The life

⁴⁶Oscar Cargill, Intellectual America (New York: Cooper Square, 1968), p. 718.

⁴⁷John Henry Raleigh, The Plays of Eugene O'Neill (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1965), p. 6.

John relates, with the loss of his parents when he was only fifteen, in spite of his earnest prayers, reflects O'Neill's attitude about the "loss" of his mother to addiction and his rebellion against his father at about the same period in his own youth. So, too, his threat of suicide and his spiritual wanderings are much the same in life as in the drama. Even though the dramatic effort expressed throughout the dramatist's devotion to his wife, Carlotta, and she viewed it as such an expression of marital devotion rather than of religious devotion,⁴⁸ the autobiographical elements appear too striking to be ignored. This is likely another instance in which the author disclosed more of his deepest feelings than he was able to admit in retrospect. Perhaps only in such intimate glimpses as in Days Without End is it really possible to get to know the playwright. "Not until the appearance of Days Without End, which describes a tormented man's estrangement from, and reversion to Roman Catholicism, the faith of his childhood, was the significance of O'Neill's early life made clear."⁴⁹ In writing Days Without End, O'Neill was surely writing a spiritual autobiography of one who had spent much time and effort in the denial of his inherited faith. The fact that the hero returns to the faith at the end of the play--one of a half dozen endings O'Neill tried--belies the biographical truth that there was never a return in the writer's real life. As he was to say

⁴⁸Bogard cites an unpublished memorandum of the director, Philip Moeller, in which he notes both O'Neill and Carlotta saw the play as more hers than his. Travis Bogard, Contour in Time (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), p. 324.

⁴⁹"Mr. Eugene O'Neill: An Iconoclast in the Theater," in Cargill, O'Neill and His Plays, p. 360.

when The Iceman Cometh (1939) was in rehearsal, in response to questions about his return to the faith: "Unfortunately, No!"

Still, hand in hand with denial there is always the sense of quest, and a nagging need to return. "'How does one locate that something outside himself to which he can belong?' is said to be the theme of every O'Neill play."⁵⁰ He was ever pursued by the Hound of Heaven, and Francis Thompson's poem was so etched in his thought that he could recite it all from memory. But he was, it was said, a true black Irishman, that is, one who has "turned against his faith and spends the rest of his life in quest of something else to believe in, something that will give meaning to his life."⁵¹

If ever he found a faith to supplant the rejected Catholicism, it was in the writings of Friedrich Nietzsche. O'Neill discovered the German philosopher in his late teens, and decades later he was still rereading and copying from Nietzsche's Thus Spake Zarathustra.⁵² He committed passages from Nietzsche to memory, and found in him satisfying substitutes to the lessons of his rejected Catholicism. It became his Catechism.⁵³ Yet, however great O'Neill's admiration for the creator of the modern notion that God was dead, he continued his own lifelong search for answers he never found.

⁵⁰Winifred L. Frazer, E. G. and E. G. O.; Emma Goldman and The Iceman Cometh (Gainesville: University Presses of Florida, 1974), p. 91.

⁵¹Sheaffer, Son and Playwright, p. 110.

⁵²Alexander, p. 103.

⁵³Gelb, pp. 121f.

Although Eugene O'Neill felt that his life was controlled by mysterious external forces, it is by no means certain that he was ever able to identify these personal Furies. And in a very real sense, he gazed unblinkingly at his life sliding impersonally by before him.⁵⁴

At the end of his life, he requested a very simple burial, without a priest present, and suggested to Carlotta that "If there is a God and I meet him, we'll talk things over personally, man to man."⁵⁵

Like a renegade Catholic, he was impelled to attack every tenet of his rejected faith. It was a long time before he recognized that his revolt was actually a search for a substitute faith. He was gradually to become . . . "an agnostic in search of redemption."⁵⁶

It was in the theater that O'Neill was to carry on his lifelong search for an answer to his spiritual longings.

As a renegade Catholic, a man of spiritual temperament who felt lost without a faith, he tried to make a religion of the theater. Hence his contempt for "the Broadway show-shop" and, conversely, the envy in his voice when he used to talk with Jig Cook and Jimmy Light about the old Greek theater, where, like religious services, the performances partook of ritual, mystery, and traffic with the gods. During his career, O'Neill was to experiment in many styles and with various devices; he would exploit virtually the full vocabulary of the theater--not only dialogue and action but masks, pantomime, song, dance movement, sound effects, speaking choruses and responsive chanting. The one constant behind his restless experimentation was his effort to elevate the theater to a temple, to help create a place where he could "belong."⁵⁷

Like Simon Harford, "obsessed by a fairy tale, we spend our lives searching for a magic door and a lost kingdom of peace."⁵⁸ He would try

⁵⁴Bowen, p. 153.

⁵⁵Gelb, p. 939.

⁵⁶Ibid., p. 75.

⁵⁷Sheaffer, Son and Artist, p. 75.

⁵⁸Eugene O'Neill, More Stately Mansions (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1964), p. 180.

to write about the "big subject," he said, that might ultimately satisfy man's--and the playwright's--surviving primitive religious instinct.⁵⁹

Thus, the purpose of the plays of O'Neill is to "explain human suffering, and somehow to justify it."⁶⁰ Man is depicted in the throes of his struggle with fate.

Fate, even when it interweaves itself with man, is always a different thing from man, who presses and struggles against it with all the violence of passion; with O'Neill, therefore, the tragical is hardly ever the contrast of distinct and opposed personalities, but the unequal and desperate struggle of each character against an objective reality which hangs over him. In this atmosphere the psychological elements also become the object, or tragic fate; and in this can perhaps be found the reason for O'Neill's tragic superiority over all other living Anglo-Saxon writers (and also the reason for his scant popularity in Protestant, alternative-seeking England), in the fact that he does not confuse man with his destiny, his internal passions or his follies; he sees man as a subject who is struck, even if it be in his most inward and secret fibers, by these passions, disasters and follies.⁶¹

Yet, it was necessary for man to conquer that fate, and to believe that such conquest was possible--even if it were never possible.⁶² O'Neill, always a boxing fan, clipped a reporter's comments about a 1921 Dempsey-Carpentier fight:

We wish every young American playwright who is about to write a tragedy had seen this fight . . . They would realize then that the school founded by Eugene O'Neill is based on a misconception of the spirit of tragedy. It does not lie in the fact that man is small and helpless in the hands of fate which outclasses him in reach and weight. The tragic fact is that man is almost good

⁵⁹Gelb, p. 601.

⁶⁰Doris V. Falk, Eugene O'Neill and the Tragic Tension (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1958), p. 4.

⁶¹Camillo Pellizzi, "Irish-Catholic Anti-Puritan," in Cargill, O'Neill and His Plays, p. 355.

⁶²Agnes Boulton, Part of a Long Story (New York: Doubleday, 1958), p. 280.

enough to win in his inspired moments. He can rock fate but he cannot down it. That is the pity of his struggle. But come to think of it, there is nothing so terribly sorrowful in tragedy after all. Fate like Jack Dempsey wins the title, but the gesture remains with man, the light heavyweight. As he goes down he hears no slow toll of numbers. All that is drowned out by the cheering.⁶³

Perhaps O'Neill's sense of tragedy was not, after all, so very different from this description. He did once say that what he wanted to communicate to his audiences was a sense of exultance derived "from seeing somebody on the stage facing life, fighting against the eternal odds, not conquering, but perhaps inevitably being conquered."⁶⁴ This was the religious character of drama that O'Neill wanted to express, for it was his belief that "all tragic drama is essentially religious in origin and in effect."⁶⁵

The theme of this tragedy is the struggle to belong. The child who had tried so hard to belong and the youth who turned from belonging became the playwright of the theme of alienation.

In O'Neill's tragic vision, there is no question that man struggles, suffers, and yearns "to belong," but the goal is unclear and the consolation rare. O'Neill's tragedy is the tragedy of the very existence of the individual self, the tragedy of relentless inner awareness and guilt, with only occasional and mysterious moments of transcendence.⁶⁶

This "belonging" brings the hero into relationship with something outside himself, something greater than himself, that can give signifi-

⁶³Gelb, p. 463.

⁶⁴Ibid., p. 521.

⁶⁵Frederic I. Carpenter, Eugene O'Neill (New York: Twayne, 1964), p. 53.

⁶⁶Ernest G. Griffin, Eugene O'Neill (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1976), p. 2.

cance to his own being.⁶⁷ Yet, the frustration of his drama is that this alienation is seldom overcome. It is the "disinherited"⁶⁸ and the "rootless,"⁶⁹ he who suffers "man's disorientation,"⁷⁰ that O'Neill prefers for his heroes. Benjamin De Casseres received the impression from O'Neill the man that "he does not belong anywhere."⁷¹ The dramatist once wrote of himself that "I will always be a stranger who never feels at home . . . who can never belong."⁷² He felt a peculiar discomfort whenever he was in the family's summer home in New London, where everyone knew everyone else, while it remained impossible for him to "belong."⁷³ To his second wife, Agnes Boulton, he wrote from Europe that "I feel reborn. I am sure! At last I belong."⁷⁴ But even when freed from Agnes that he might marry Carlotta Monterey, he felt so alone, so much a stranger.⁷⁵ He could walk away from a home on which he had lavished so much concern and money, like one who could never belong anywhere.

⁶⁷Joseph Wood Krutch, "Modernism" in Modern Drama (New York: Cornell University Press, 1953), pp. 118ff.

⁶⁸T. K. Whipple, "Tragedy of Eugene O'Neill," New Republic, XLI (January 21, 1925), 223.

⁶⁹Sheaffer, Son and Playwright, p. 167.

⁷⁰John Gassner, "Homage to O'Neill," in Cargill, O'Neill and His Plays, p. 325.

⁷¹Sheaffer, Son and Artist, p. 258.

⁷²Edd Winfield Parks, "Eugene O'Neill's Quest," Tulane Drama Review, IV (Spring, 1960), 101.

⁷³Sheaffer, Son and Playwright, p. 50.

⁷⁴Sheaffer, Son and Artist, p. 294.

⁷⁵Bowen, p. 213.

And when he died, he died, as it might be said he had been born, in the place of transients. "Born in a hotel room--and God damn it--died in a hotel room."⁷⁶ This was the man who as a youth had been accused of vanity for constantly looking at himself in every mirror he passed, and who countered with, "No, I just want to be sure I'm here."⁷⁷ A poem he wrote in 1942 ends, "Seeking a lost identity."⁷⁸ There is in O'Neill a "central dividedness"⁷⁹ which exhibits itself in so many of the plays. Chris Christopherson in "Anna Christie" (1919-20) does not "belong" in the universe, as represented by his enemy, that "ole davil sea." Yank of The Hairy Ape (1921) manages in the end to belong only among the animals of the zoo, where "belonging" brings about his death. Dion Anthony in The Great God Brown (1925) loses all sense of belonging, or of having anything at all to which he might belong. And yet, it was the author's own failure to belong that drove him into the restlessness that could find an outlet only in these very plays of alienation.⁸⁰

O'Neill's sense of alienation is viewed in different ways. For one, it is "an American tragedy" of a sense of alienation felt by the son of an Irish immigrant.⁸¹ For another, it is seen as a "war with the

⁷⁶Gelb, p. 939.

⁷⁷Sheaffer, Son and Playwright, p. 240.

⁷⁸Sheaffer, Son and Artist, p. 534.

⁷⁹Heilman, p. 72.

⁸⁰Sheaffer, Son and Playwright, p. 481.

⁸¹Carpenter, pp. 24-28.

fathers."⁸² But above all, it was a "cosmic anguish."⁸³ The alienation was the "sickness" of which he spoke, the loss of religious conviction. His was a "search for godhead."⁸⁴ "The 'old God was dead' and a new one was not in sight."⁸⁵ In a letter to Barrett Clark in 1919, O'Neill wrote: "Perhaps I can explain the nature of my feeling for the impelling, inscrutable forces behind life which it is my ambition to at least faintly shadow at their work in my plays."⁸⁶ If he did not really overcome the alienation, perhaps he longed for it so much that it seems he did. As Agnes Boulton described it,

At times, however, Gene must have achieved briefly a sense of that expanded consciousness in which the self, forgotten, becomes one with whatever is behind the veil; he speaks of it in a prose poem the next fall, which he gave me as a gift; and perhaps, in those beautiful and moving lines that Edmund speaks near the end of Long Day's Journey into Night--those lines that end: "It was a great mistake, my being born a man. I would have been much more successful as a sea-gull or a fish. As it is I will always be a stranger who never feels at home, who does not really want and is not really wanted. . . ."⁸⁷

Thus, the work of O'Neill "is to some extent an effort to find his own salvation, less through understanding of himself as a quester than by

⁸²John Gassner, "The Nature of O'Neill's Achievement: A Summary and Appraisal," in John Gassner (ed.) O'Neill (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1964), p. 169.

⁸³John Gassner, "Homage to O'Neill," in Cargill, O'Neill and His Plays, p. 324.

⁸⁴Leonard Chabrowe, Ritual and Pathos (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1976), p. 106.

⁸⁵"The Trouble with Brown," Time (December 7, 1953), p. 77.

⁸⁶Eugene O'Neill, "Inscrutable Forces," in Cargill, O'Neill and His Plays, p. 100.

⁸⁷Boulton, pp. 280f.

way of exploring the nature of what lay at the end of the quest."⁸⁸

This search for meaning and purpose in life is the mystical element in O'Neill,⁸⁹ even as O'Neill himself speaks of the "mystical pattern which manifests itself as an overtone in The Great God Brown, dimly behind and beyond the words and actions of the characters."⁹⁰

The oneness is not synonymous with mystery, though in many ways mysterious. It has enough contents and force to imply the rejection of many of the common substitute deities: money (Marco Millions), the forces harnessed by science (Dynamo), socialism (Days Without End). The unity which is the object of O'Neill's mysticism has no attributes of personality, not even intelligence. He proposes acceptance of the universe but not belief in God; for if the universe is not controlled by an intellect, we can accept its vagaries even with joy, but any controlling intellect would have to seem either ludicrous or vicious. . . .

O'Neill's type of mysticism was suprarational rather than irrational. Never anti-intellectual, its role was not to contradict or ignore empirical evidence, but to supplement what man had learned through other forms of learning.⁹¹

The use of masks is part of this mysticism, this drive to belong to the "inscrutable forces." The characteristic structure of an O'Neill play is "a movement toward unmasking, which is often also a movement of the principal characters toward discovery of the stance they must take

⁸⁸Travis Bogard in Eugene O'Neill, The Later Plays of Eugene O'Neill (New York: Modern Library, 1967), p. xxii.

⁸⁹Falk, p. 6.

⁹⁰Eugene O'Neill, "An Explanation of The Great God Brown," in Meserve, p. 130.

⁹¹Henry F. Pommer, "Mysticism of Eugene O'Neill," Modern Drama, IX (May 1966), 28. It is quite true, in one sense, that O'Neill's wish to eliminate the supernatural for the psychological notion of unconscious compulsions drove him back to the supernatural by way of the demonic. So states Hugh Dickinson, Myth on the Modern Stage (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1969), pp. 158f.

toward the fundamental problems of existence."⁹²

This was the nature of salvation in O'Neill. He had early forgone the temptation to preach the kind of salvation the anarchist-socialist leanings of his youth might have encouraged in him. He had been tempted, but had resisted the impulse.⁹³ And even though he saw an idiotic ambition toward self-destruction in man--mankind didn't really want to be saved--it is "salvation the agnostic playwright is seeking."⁹⁴ For O'Neill, one can find no salvation outside religion.⁹⁵ It can hardly be said, with Brustein, that O'Neill is calling for a "new Savior . . . who will reveal to us how we can be saved from ourselves," and that the plays that precede Days Without End ". . . show O'Neill applying for the position himself."⁹⁶ Rather, these plays were but masks of a "self-imposed salvation that did not manifestly exist in the gathering dark night of Eugene O'Neill."⁹⁷

For the search was not a success--the alienation remained. "He was a man in search of a philosophy he never found. He never succeeded in fitting together the jumbled pieces of the jigsaw puzzle of the uni-

⁹²Eugene M. Waith, "Eugene O'Neill: An Exercise in Unmasking," in Gassner, O'Neill, p. 34.

⁹³Gelb, p. 830.

⁹⁴Elizabeth Shipley Sergeant, "O'Neill: The Man With a Mask," New Republic, L (March 16, 1927), 91.

⁹⁵John Howard Lawson, Theory and Techniques of Playwriting (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1936), p. 130.

⁹⁶Robert Brustein, The Theater of Revolt (Boston: Little, Brown, 1964), p. 329.

⁹⁷Thomas P. McDonnell, "O'Neill's Drama of the Psyche," Catholic World, CXC VII (May 1963), 121.

verse into a picture that made sense."⁹⁸ Writing of The Great God Brown, Krutch says O'Neill treated subjectively "the problem created in his own soul by the absence of any ability to define in satisfactory terms the something outside with which he felt the need to establish a relationship."⁹⁹ The search then moves on, and ultimately ends--in frustration. So O'Neill can be called "primarily a dramatist of frustration,"¹⁰⁰ who "has made the most exhaustive studies of frustration in its various manifestations."¹⁰¹

For the defeat his protagonists suffer is spiritual; they end in a spiritual frustration, a spiritual failure. . . .

Spiritual frustration, then, is not only the specific tragic theme of modern American literature, but also--if we may believe our writers--the all but universal condition of American life.¹⁰²

The plays are a veritable Odyssey of a man in search of a god. Perhaps the themes of the plays are varied¹⁰³ only because the search was so varied.

His "Godism" took various forms--socialism, syndicalism, anarchism, and always, Roman Catholicism. In the world of the theatre he may have been an isolated figure, but in the world at large he was one of millions of searchers for gods that failed them.¹⁰⁴

⁹⁸Doyle, p. 138.

⁹⁹Joseph Wood Krutch, The American Drama Since 1918 (New York: Braziller, 1957), p. 105.

¹⁰⁰Leon Howard, Literature and the American Tradition (New York: Doubleday, 1960), p. 278.

¹⁰¹Granville Hicks, The Great Tradition (New York: Macmillan, 1935), p. 253.

¹⁰²Whipple, pp. 223ff.

¹⁰³Krutch, American Drama, p. 78.

¹⁰⁴Cargill, O'Neill and His Plays, p. 9.

It seemed a part of his character, for "he was forever abandoning what he had in favor of something else he thought he wanted, but never found."¹⁰⁵ Yet, it was in part the very fruitlessness of his search that caused him to go on seeking. Each time he "found" a new concept of god, he would discover to his disappointment that it was really the same disappointing god he had known before. Of one such "god" he wrote: "God with a change of whiskers becomes the State--and there's always a Holy Book--dogmas--heresy trials--an infallible Pope--etc., etc., until you become sick."¹⁰⁶ He creates his own cosmologies, "sometimes theistic, sometimes scientific."¹⁰⁷

O'Neill is similarly confused about the face of God in the modern world. In Dynamo, God is whirring machinery. In Strange Interlude, He presents himself through an "electrical display." In The Fountain, God is in the biological inheritance passed on through the family. This constant redefinition of God, O'Neill finds to be his primary function as a dramatist. . . . The purpose is Miltonic--but it is difficult to follow Milton's path when you have already declared the death of God, and postulated a purely mechanistic universe. O'Neill's problem is the problem of the modern drama as a whole: how to bring a religious vision to bear on a totally secular world. But instead of working this problem out, O'Neill merely repeats, with almost automatic regularity, that the problem exists. . . .¹⁰⁸

There is no specific pattern that can be discerned throughout the O'Neill corpus as a picture of his search. In some plays, in fact, there exists within one drama a whole pantheon of gods.¹⁰⁹ But there are trends dis-

¹⁰⁵Atkinson, in Gelb, pp. xixf.

¹⁰⁶Gelb, pp. 823f.

¹⁰⁷Raleigh, p. 3.

¹⁰⁸Brustein, pp. 330f.

¹⁰⁹Raleigh, p. 7.

cernible in the course of the plays. The earliest plays, before the twenties, provide the most general vision of his search: there are no specific attempts to answer the question. In the plays of the twenties, he makes his wildest attempts to explore the problem. Then, beginning in the twenties, and going into the plays of his later years there is more of an attempt to find the divine in the closest human relationships. For example, in The First Man (1921), Welded (1922-23), and, above all, in Days Without End (1931-34), he looked to the marital relationship--autobiographically as well as dramatically--for the answer to the search. Of Welded, the Gelbs write:

Clearly O'Neill believed that he had at last discovered in the marriage relationship the substitute for religion he had been seeking. But his new-found faith, like all the others he subsequently embraced, did not last long.¹¹⁰

This search for meaning in his relationships with those about him was to grow as a pattern of hope for O'Neill in this desperate search.

Ah, Wilderness! is the first of his directly autobiographical works, and serves as a prelude to the final tragedies, in which O'Neill put to one side his attempt to develop a modern theology. From that work forth, he sought only to know himself and those who were closest to him.¹¹¹

By the time of the cycle plays¹¹² "there is no suggestion that god exists. Man is alone, and is bent on self-dispossession."¹¹³ If there is anything in the later plays beyond the self, it is the community, represented largely by the family--as in the Cycle, "A Tale of Possessors

¹¹⁰Gelb, p. 521.

¹¹¹Bogard in O'Neill, The Later Plays, pp. xxiif.

¹¹²Written from 1934 to 1943.

¹¹³Bogard in O'Neill, The Later Plays, p. xxx.

Self-Dispossessed," Long Day's Journey (1940-41) and A Moon for the Misbegotten (1943)—or the "family group" as in The Iceman Cometh (1939).

O'Neill himself seemed unaware of all this searching for a satisfactory god-figure. In response to a graduate student's questions in 1931, he replied: "As for the various presentations of God in my plays, I don't see exactly to what you refer."¹¹⁴ Perhaps it was "because O'Neill never knew what he wanted out of life that he never knew where he was going, or what were the things for which he felt instinctively he should be searching."¹¹⁵

However much O'Neill seemed to search for a new god, and even give up the search in his later life and plays, there was always a return to the old faith. Wherever his wanderings led him, they ultimately led him back in some wise to the Catholicism he had left but could never escape. As his hero mockingly says of his parents in The Great God Brown (1925), O'Neill, too had this "fixation on old Mama Christianity."¹¹⁶ Deborah Harford warns Sara Melody, in A Touch of the Poet (1940), "that the Harfords never part with their dreams even when they deny them. They cannot. That is the family curse."¹¹⁷ His was a "private and never-ending struggle with his Catholic conscience."¹¹⁸

¹¹⁴Chabrowe, p. 103.

¹¹⁵Frederick Lumley, New Trends in Twentieth Century Drama (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), p. 115.

¹¹⁶Act I, Scene 1, Plays, III, 269.

¹¹⁷Eugene O'Neill, A Touch of the Poet (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957), p. 84.

¹¹⁸Gelb, p. 468.

Toward the end of his life, his mental and physical health in serious decline, he thought often on suicide as a way out of his miseries, but "deplored the vestiges of Catholic indoctrination which held him back from this step."¹¹⁹ In his search, which perhaps he saw more as flight, he was constantly pursued by "The Hound of Heaven":

I fled Him, down the night and down the days;
I fled Him, down the arches of the years;
I fled Him, down the labyrinthine ways
Of my own mind. . . .

This poem by an ardently Catholic poet, Francis Thompson, O'Neill could recite whether drunk or sober, and even patterned three plays about flight after it: Servitude (1913-14), Welded (1922-23), and Days Without End (1931-34).¹²⁰ Yet, however much he was pursued and no matter how much he sought, there was never any actual return. When he and Agnes were married by "the most delightful, feeble-minded, Godhelpus, mincing Methodist minister that ever prayed through his nose,"¹²¹ O'Neill felt strangely moved and expressed the wish later that he might also believe in the minister's gentle God. Days Without End clearly spells a yearning on the part of the playwright, in spite of all his objections. At the time of the play's production, considerable question was raised about O'Neill's possible return to Catholicism. Carlotta, herself not basically of a spiritual nature,¹²² seemed to encourage these speculations. But O'Neill was to deny that there was any return. Near the end

¹¹⁹Ibid., p. 906.

¹²⁰Alexander, p. 176.

¹²¹Sheaffer, Son and Playwright, p. 416.

¹²²Sheaffer, Son and Artist, p. 424.

of his life, his wishes concerning his burial, and Carlotta's remarks that he had never really been a Catholic as an adult, clearly indicated the pursuit, as the search, had failed. His ultimate response, and defense, seemed to be an escape to mockery.

There was that in him which desired this--and that in him which denied it. I suppose he was haunted by the God whom he had discarded. But there was neither sentimentality nor regret in his attitude toward that God and the religion in which he had been brought up--rather a robust, humorous mockery, a personal challenge and a delight in that challenge itself. There was always in him a persistent sense of the reality that lies behind what is, what seems to be. He could find nothing of that in the God he knew and whom he had outgrown; nor could he really find it elsewhere--either in love or in idea. So he saw life as a tragedy and had neither the desire nor curiosity to go beyond the limits of his own vision. He loved his own tragic conception of life and would not have given it up for the world. He even saw it at times as humorous, and would laugh at himself for it; but he would never permit any knowledge or idea, or discovery of science that would interfere with it, to enter his mind. His index was as rigorous as that of the Catholic Church.¹²³

While there was no return to the church, there was a constant return to its theology, which provided much of the background for the dramas. Several facets of Catholic theology appear in his drama and show how thoroughly these ideas were ingrained in the dramatist, and how readily he used them in the plays.

The idea of sin was a common element in O'Neill's plays. He claimed that "In all my plays sin is punished and redemption takes place."¹²⁴ As a would-be poet for the New London Telegraph, he showed this struggle he was waging with his past with such phrases as "Thy terrible Judgment Seat" and "Thy angry glance."¹²⁵ He never denied

¹²³Boulton, p. 280.

¹²⁴Bowen, p. 182.

¹²⁵Gelb, p. 211.

that sense of sin that is so much a part of Catholic indoctrination, where the Catechism begins with the description of the human condition as one of sin. His "overwhelming gift as a dramatist was a consciousness of the ineradicable strain of human sin as perpetuating itself through the generations--a vision of Old Testament man as American."¹²⁶

Most of O'Neill's people at last confess that they are in need of grace, not "justice." Brown died with Cybel's prayer, "Our Father, who art." Reuben's final cry is, "I only want you to hide me, Mother." Nina tires of the attempt to enjoy father, lover, and husband all in one, is "contentedly weary with life," as she delivers herself to the fatherly protection of "good old Charley." Only Lavinia refuses to bow, remaining "woodenly erect" in her defiance. In the Greek drama the Erinyes are followed by the Eumenides which augur the beginning of a new age. But O'Neill lacks the faith of a new order. This appears in O'Neill's dramatic technique. With few exceptions, the end of his characters is foreshadowed at the beginning. They begin with a "curse" from which they cannot escape. Locked up in their original sin they have recourse to original faith.¹²⁷

With the sin, original and actual, there is the guilt. "A part of "Daddy's bedtime secret" is that "Man is born broken."¹²⁸ The "drama of traumatic loss of belief" was also the "drama of guilt."¹²⁹ Interestingly, Agnes Boulton took one of the scenarios Eugene had written and turned it into a drama herself. She entitled it "The Guilty One."¹³⁰ O'Neill himself once suggested as a title for a projected play that was

¹²⁶Arlene Croce, "Old Testament Man as American," National Review, XX (January 16, 1968), 44.

¹²⁷Harry Slochower, "Eugene O'Neill's Lost Moderns," in Car-gill, O'Neill and His Plays, p. 388.

¹²⁸The Great God Brown, Act 4, Scene 1, Plays, III, 318.

¹²⁹McDonnell, p. 123.

¹³⁰Sheaffer, Son and Artist, p. 147.

never written, "The Guilty are Guilty."¹³¹ Characters in many of the plays, as Ah, Wilderness! (1932), Desire Under the Elms (1924) and Long Day's Journey (1940-41) are caught up "in their endless awareness of guilt in some shape or other."¹³² In all of the later plays, O'Neill was "steeped in his own sense of guilt and betrayal."¹³³ All attempts to be free from guilt seemed to make the feelings of guilt only greater, and "the more he tries to clear himself of guilt the more entangled he becomes in it."¹³⁴ The playwright, "riddled with guilt feelings,"¹³⁵ cannot but create characters in his own image.

The answer to guilt, in the plays as in the church, was often to be found in the confessional. O'Neill "used the theater as a vast public confessional."¹³⁶ Two plays in particular, The Iceman Cometh (1939) and Long Day's Journey (1940-41), are but long confessions.

This tension of his inner conflicts was his plays' tension. And this tension, this pain of spirit, could only be released if shared by an audience, by a body of fellow sufferers who in the sharing became father confessors.¹³⁷

Behind the sense of sin and guilt was the notion of fate, or, theologically, predestination. It was an idea O'Neill could not escape.

¹³¹Ibid., p. 200.

¹³²Morris Freedman, American Drama in Social Context (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1971), p. 22.

¹³³Gelb, p. 833.

¹³⁴Muchnic, p. 127.

¹³⁵Sheaffer, Son and Playwright, p. 171.

¹³⁶Edwin A. Engle, "Ideas in the Plays of Eugene O'Neill," in Griffin, p. 35.

¹³⁷Chabrowe, p. xii.

In the plays, as with the whistle blasts of Bound East for Cardiff (1914), the tom-tom in The Emperor Jones (1920), and the foghorn of Long Day's Journey (1940-41), even the stage devices reflect the steady movement of an inexorable fate.

In reality they are symbolical elements dramatized; they represent . . . a brooding Fate, a predestination. Since we have already spoken of predestination with regard to English and Scotch Protestant writers, we may observe the form it assumes with an American of Irish and Catholic origin: whether O'Neill is dealing with ancestral terrors latent in the soul, as with Jones, or with a strange, cruel nature, as in all his sea drama, man's destiny, here, always depends on a terrible, unequal struggle between man and a created reality from which he is sharply distinguished. If Providence does not intervene and assist man with a power which is not wholly human, we know already that he will succumb. This attitude can be found even in the subsequent psychological and psychoanalytical plays. O'Neill, irreligious in his beliefs, does not perhaps perceive that, in his own particular form of anti-Puritanism there is implied a Catholic outlook in the strictest sense--the acceptance of the positive, powerful reality of evil, and the existence of grace and the miraculous.¹³⁸

Yet, we do not look for any sophisticated theology from the dramatist. His "movement toward Catholic theology, crude as it may seem, has the profound interest of an energetic response to confusion."¹³⁹ "To the orthodox Christian, O'Neill's own religious statements will probably sound thin, unfocused, moving but deceptively insubstantial."¹⁴⁰ Perhaps it is less the loss of all religious conviction than the confusion concerning the object of that conviction which causes this crudeness in O'Neill; it is a confusion he shared with many moderns. For

¹³⁸Pellizzi, pp. 354f.

¹³⁹Lionel Trilling, "Eugene O'Neill," New Republic, LXXXVIII (September 23, 1936), 55.

¹⁴⁰Lionel Basney, "Eugene O'Neill: Earthbound Aspiration," Christianity Today, XVIII (November 23, 1973), 22.

O'Neill was incapable of dealing with theological issues in any rational manner, confused and anxious as he was over his own loss of faith and search for a substitute. He never could escape the question, "What shall I do to be saved?"¹⁴¹ While he "renounced the attempt to know the nature of the modern god and to explicate it directly on the stage,"¹⁴² he never really ended his confused and tragic search. Having rejected the church, "the one element of his heritage which might have provided him with a spiritual 'home' failed him."¹⁴³

A tragically split personality, Eugene O'Neill recorded in many of his plays the spiritual conflicts from which he suffered all his life long, his strenuous but unavailing search for a faith by which he might govern his life. In Days Without End, the hero at the end recaptures his faith, but the resolution is not dramatically embodied; it is a resolution born of frayed nerves and neurasthenic desperation. O'Neill never found the way, and his later plays--witness The Iceman Cometh--are a confession of his failure. Though weakly constructed, Days Without End reveals the nature of the spiritual struggle O'Neill waged, the confusion that plagued him, the madness of denial that seized hold of him and would not let him go. For the author stands unmistakably delineated, guilt-stricken, anguished, driven to embrace God and yet incapable of combating the ugly suspicion that there is nothing beyond this earth. A divided personality like his begetter, the central character is both seeker and sinner, saint and blasphemer.¹⁴⁴

Ultimately, his fruitless efforts at recapturing his discarded faith failed. Failed, too, were all the efforts at reaching a satisfactory substitute to meet the innate need for something outside of himself in which he might believe. Having left the church, he was unhappy outside

¹⁴¹Griffin, p. 17.

¹⁴²Bogard, in O'Neill, The Later Plays, p. xii.

¹⁴³Carpenter, p. 27.

¹⁴⁴Charles I. Glicksberg, Literature and Religion (Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1960), pp. 155f.

the church; having denied God--for God was dead--he had to go on looking for him. Though out of this struggle and search seemed to come the creative output of the dramatist, one cannot but help feel for the man who in his agony left so poignant a trail of his searchings that led him, spiritually and personally, nowhere. As the title of the projected cycle that was to include the play Dynamo (1928) put it: "God is Dead! Long Live--What?" While it was impossible to live with the idea of God, it seemed even more impossible to live without the idea of God.

The failure of O'Neill to find a kind of peace of mind is not, however, quite the same as a search for God in any philosophical sense. His was not a metaphysical exercise that proved fruitless. It was a personal exercise. It is one of the gross errors of O'Neill scholarship that the nature of this struggle is intellectualized into some manner of theological exercise. It is true that "O'Neill's metaphysical aims are by no means consistently realized; to some critics they in fact seem only a symptom of blown-up ambitions."¹⁴⁵ It is also quite true that O'Neill spoke of being "acutely conscious of the Force behind--(Fate, God, our biological past creating our own present--whatever one calls it--Mystery, certainly)."¹⁴⁶ Perhaps he only wished to reflect the ideas of his theatrical idol, for Strindberg also wrote of the "intervention of unknown Powers."¹⁴⁷ But to suggest that O'Neill's interest in char-

¹⁴⁵Walter Stein, The Twentieth Century Mind (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), p. 444.

¹⁴⁶Gelb, p. 4.

¹⁴⁷August Strindberg, From An Occult Diary (New York: Hill and Wang, 1963), p. 7.

acter was "metaphysical rather than psychological"¹⁴⁸ seems to ignore much of what the playwright wrote. His was not a complete escape from reality, nor does he set up an emotionally and spiritually independent inner kingdom.¹⁴⁹ The lives of the characters of O'Neill are lived out in community and the essence of his drama is the struggle in the lives of those persons in community. His "insistent concern, then, with 'the force behind' human lives . . . somehow lacks a proportionate sureness of resources."¹⁵⁰ Mysticism, after all, is not metaphysics; it is rather the denial of the claim of metaphysics. Further, O'Neill's very mysticism is hardly to be equated with what is usually termed mysticism. As Lionel Trilling wrote in the playwright's mid-career, neither St. Francis nor St. Thomas could have told us much about O'Neill's religious solution in the plays: it was "neither a mystical ecstasy nor the reasoned proof of assumptions," but, more like the religion of Blaise Pascal, a "poetic utilitarianism."¹⁵¹ Hence, it can be said of O'Neill that he is usually "on much safer ground where he is simply projecting his sense of life as a trap than in his efforts to trace the trap's origins and significance (or to point the way towards escape)."¹⁵²

For O'Neill is not searching for "God": he is searching for a relation (as he so clearly stated) between God and man. His "quest for

¹⁴⁸Lawson, p. 129.

¹⁴⁹Ibid.

¹⁵⁰Stein, p. 448.

¹⁵¹Trilling, p. 178.

¹⁵²Stein, pp. 447f.

a valid faith . . . shifted from the philosophical to the personal."¹⁵³ Thus, his ideas about deity are confused; what he retained was a feeling about the necessity of that relationship, a relationship which his background told him was one broken by sin, sustained by guilt, and overcome only by a forgiveness he never seemed able to accept. In the later plays, his "extraordinary concentration was to be directed to the projection of the substance of his own inner life fully and directly into his dramas. What he sought was self-knowledge and forgiveness. . . ."¹⁵⁴ While O'Neill was, in his ambivalent manner, enamoured with vengeance,¹⁵⁵ it was really pardon and reconciliation he sought, as his plays demonstrate.

Still, if beauty cannot be found in human existence, some kind of reconciliation is possible for some people. Despite the various tragedies, these same late plays tend to have also an element of reconciliation, of people coming together to understand and to forgive and, sometimes, to love: Erie and Charles Hughes in Hughie; Edmund Tyrone and his father and the Tyrone brothers in Long Day's Journey Into Night; Con and Nora Melody in A Touch of the Poet; Jamie Tyrone and Josie Hogan and, at the end, Josie and Phil Hogan in A Moon for the Misbegotten. There are no happy endings, except for Sara Melody, but at least everyone is given a chance to attempt to explain himself or herself. The final implication of the form of these plays would seem to be that the highest act of human charity is simply to try to understand, although this is not always to be understood as equivalent to forgiving.¹⁵⁶

It is this sense of reconciliation that gave the peculiar flavor

¹⁵³Parks, p. 104.

¹⁵⁴Bogard, in O'Neill, The Later Plays, p. viii.

¹⁵⁵He once called revenge "the subconscious motive for the individual's behavior with the rest of society." Sheaffer, Son and Playwright, p. 41. He also expressed the notion that the atomic bomb was a wonderful invention because with it man might be able to annihilate all mankind. Gelb, p. 861.

¹⁵⁶Raleigh, pp. 207f.

to O'Neill's concern for a theater of worship. This experience of ritual in the theater could enable the audience "to experience a Dionysian communion with life itself. And . . . only in such communion would the pain and death of life appear justified."¹⁵⁷ The dramatist once said of one of his characters that her tragedy consisted in her inability to see the oneness of mankind, whereas O'Neill himself stressed the unity of mankind.¹⁵⁸ Of prejudice, O'Neill said that it would continue "until we understand the Oneness of Mankind. Life is hard and bitter enough without, in addition, burdening ourselves with prejudices."¹⁵⁹ Ultimately, that oneness could be realized only through the realization of personal forgiveness.

For O'Neill, the notion of forgiveness is one of the strongest remains from his Catholic heritage. A Catholic definition of the term runs like a summary of the theme in O'Neill:

In Catholic teaching sin is an offense against God resulting in a state or condition of guilt . . . in which the sinner is estranged from God, deprived of His grace and friendship, and under a juridical necessity of paying the debt of punishment incurred by his transgression. By the forgiveness of his sin the sinner is reconciled to God and restored to divine favor, and his liability to punishment is remitted. Since it is God who is offended in sin, the forgiveness of it must always come from Him, at least mediately.¹⁶⁰

It is in Days Without End (1931-34) that the theme of forgiveness is treated with the greatest candor. John Loving, novelist and ex-Catholic,

¹⁵⁷Chabrowe, p. 93.

¹⁵⁸Egil Törnqvist, A Drama of Souls (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1969), p. 217.

¹⁵⁹Gelb, p. 536.

¹⁶⁰T. A. Porter, "Forgiveness of Sins," New Catholic Encyclopedia (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1967), V, 1011.

struggles with the novel he is writing as he struggles with his own personal dilemma--of which his novel is but a reflection. His crisis of faith comes when a visit from his uncle, Father Matthew Baird, and his agony over his adulterous relationship--with his wife's best friend--coincide. While it is the forgiveness of his wife Elsa that John really seeks, there is the repeated recognition that the source of forgiveness is the God he had denied so long before, when God took his parents from him. In the end, as he prays at the altar in a restoration of his faith, John is acting out the words his uncle spoke earlier: "It is only God who can open her heart to forgiveness and give her back the will to live."¹⁶¹

The nature of forgiveness in O'Neill is seen clearly in The Great God Brown (1925). The characters in the play are controlled less by their passions than by their guilt. Brown has this very meaningful comment on man's condition: "Ssssh! This is Daddy's bedtime secret for today: Man is born broken. He lives by mending. The grace of God is glue!"¹⁶² The play has about it the feel of a courtroom, and O'Neill writes the stage directions at times as if he were setting a court scene. This repetition and the place of the characters within the scenes, "Brown facing his father on the level of material success, Dion facing God on the level of the spiritual quest . . . composes a picture of man on trial

¹⁶¹Act IV, Scene 1, Plays, III, 559.

¹⁶²Act IV, Scene 1, Plays, III, 318.

before a judge."¹⁶³ This courtroom motif reminds one of the forensic nature of the Roman Catholic idea of forgiveness. Cybel, the Earth Mother, says that Brown is "healthy and handsome--but he's too guilty."¹⁶⁴ Dion speaks often in terms of guilt and pardon. To Cybel, Dion can say of Brown, "God forgive me the evil I've done him!"¹⁶⁵ And at Dion's death, with his mask off, Dion pleads, "Forgive me, Billy."¹⁶⁶ With his wife Margaret he begs, "O woman--my love--that I have sinned against in my sick pride and cruelty--forgive my sins--forgive my solitude--forgive my sickness--forgive me!"¹⁶⁷ But he cannot belong to Margaret as he would, and neither does Cybel provide the relief he seeks; he is "condemned to the cell of self until his death."¹⁶⁸

In The Great God Brown, O'Neill sees man as a prisoner in his body. His only escape is in an inner direction toward the roots of God he holds in himself. In all the world, there is no human being he can comprehend or whose comprehension enables him to unmask himself and thus be freed of loneliness.¹⁶⁹

Yet, the depth of the anguished dilemma of O'Neill characters is their great difficulty in accepting forgiveness. Two characters in particular exhibit this impasse in their lives. Lavinia, in Mourning

¹⁶³Alan Downer, Fifty Years of American Drama: 1900-1950 (Chicago: Regnery, 1951) p. 97, as quoted in Frank P. Cunningham, "The Great God Brown and O'Neill's Romantic Vision," Ball State University Forum, XIV (Summer 1973), 77.

¹⁶⁴Act II, Scene 1, Plays, III, 285.

¹⁶⁵Act II, Scene 3, Plays, III, 287.

¹⁶⁶Ibid., III, 299.

¹⁶⁷Act II, Scene 2, Plays, III, 292.

¹⁶⁸Bogard, Contour in Time, p. 264.

¹⁶⁹Ibid.

Becomes Electra (1929-31), shows her defiance for the very idea of forgiveness. There is really no pardon for any of the Mannons. As deep as their need for forgiveness, there is little willingness on the part of any of them to extend pardon. "The single act of grace in the entire trilogy is performed by a human character, Lavinia, when she frees Peter."¹⁷⁰ Such grace Lavinia offers to still another person, Adam Brant: "May God find forgiveness for your sins! May the soul of our cousin, Adam Mannon, rest in peace!"¹⁷¹ But as an act of forgiveness, it is quite meaningless: Lavinia and Orin have just killed Adam. This need for forgiveness was desperately felt by the characters themselves, particularly by Orin. When, in the last moments of his guilt-ridden life, he thinks about death as joining his mother, he "tells" her: "Mother! Do you know what I'll do then? I'll get on my knees and ask for forgiveness."¹⁷²

Here, as in Lavinia's recognition . . . the idealism is not clear and unmistakable, because of the context of the scene. Lavinia is trying to drive him to commit suicide, and there is no trace of pagan nobility in his response to the idea of death. Moreover, it is as if Christine, whom Lavinia for the moment embodies, were demanding his suicide as payment for her own: an act of eye-for-eye justice. Even so, he sees that death will be a way to peace and reunion with his mother, only if he begs her forgiveness--which forgiveness can only be obtained by his first forgiving her. This is the meaning of the speech and the reason that it convulses him: he is purging himself of the jealous hatred that his love for his mother had become.¹⁷³

¹⁷⁰Chester Clayton Long, The Role of Nemesis in the Structure of Selected Plays of Eugene O'Neill (The Hague: Mouton, 1968), p. 169.

¹⁷¹The Hunted, Act IV, Plays, II, 115.

¹⁷²The Haunted, Act III, Plays, II, 166.

¹⁷³Dickinson, pp. 170f.

Lavinia stands in the way of Orin's forgiveness, and only by repeating the act of his mother can he effect an atonement.¹⁷⁴ Lavinia seems to be speaking for the whole Mannon clan when she cries after Hazel, who has asked her not to marry her brother Peter, lest the same fate Orin met might befall Peter: "I'm not asking God or anybody for forgiveness. I forgive myself! . . . I hope there is a hell for the good somewhere!"¹⁷⁵

It is in The Iceman Cometh (1939) that the rejection of forgiveness is the most brutal. Theodore Hickman--Hickey--visits his old friends the derelicts of Harry Hope's saloon, but with a difference in this his final visit. He does not drink, he does not joke, his desire for women is gone, and he talks all the time of saving them from their lies of pipe dreams. This great change has come about in the life of Hickey because of his heinous crime: he has killed his wife. The pattern of his life had been that of a typical traveling salesman: absence from home, loneliness while on the road, drinking and whoring. But whenever he returned home, there was Evelyn, always ready to forgive. But Hickey could not entertain any more of her forgiveness; there was a limit to the acceptance of her pardon: "There's a limit to the guilt you can feel and the forgiveness and pity you can take!"¹⁷⁶

Such forgiveness O'Neill himself seemed unable to accept, which was the agony of his life. And the inability to accept forgiveness seemed tied inextricably not with God as Father, but with the mother.

¹⁷⁴Chabrowe, p. 154.

¹⁷⁵The Haunted, Act IV, Plays, II, 174.

¹⁷⁶Act IV, Plays, III, 715.

Even as the idea of alienation appears so commonly in the plays, there was in his own life an alienation, personally, from his own mother, and, religiously speaking, from the Mother of God as represented by the church, the Mother Church of Catholicism. The "search" for gods in the plays centers around mother-figures, the Mother-God in disguise, and with many of these figures the heroes have "love affairs," some of them bizarre.¹⁷⁷ But the search for the Mother-God, and the forgiveness he might have enjoyed at its end, is ever complicated by the other aspect of woman, that aspect represented by the prostitute. For "O'Neill's sense of the dual nature of woman reflects much of his own fear and his needs--rooted deeply in the fact of his own experience."¹⁷⁸ This dichotomy--Mother-God and prostitute--is the essence of the tragedy which was Eugene O'Neill and which he wrote, for

. . . life and action exist in a perpetual tension between opposites, each of which owes its existence to the presence of the other. This tension is the source of all change and growth, for as night exists only in contrast to day, so night flows eternally into day and day to night again.¹⁷⁹

This forgiveness so desperately sought by O'Neill and yet so totally rejected is represented by the failure of acceptance and consequent rejection of the Mother-God, and the movement toward the woman as prostitute. Whatever symbols might be involved, these symbols are but veiled allusions to this struggle--the yearning for the forgiveness of the Mother-God, and turning to the prostitute when that forgiveness

¹⁷⁷For example, Reuben Light's with the electric generator in Dynamo, and Chris Christopherson's with "that old devil sea in "Anna Christie."

¹⁷⁸Bogard, in O'Neill, The Later Plays, p. xvi.

¹⁷⁹Falk, p. 4.

fails. This constantly recurring theme is the repeated refrain of both his life and his drama.

Such is the world O'Neill creates in his dramatic art. It is a world in which the characters would like to take for granted the Death of God, but in reality cannot because they are too steeped in their own past. Especially is this true of the men in the plays, who are guilt-ridden and desperate for forgiveness, but for whom the one place of certain forgiveness fails: the mother.

Chapter 3

MOTHER OF GOD

O'Neill was deeply involved in a search. His constant personal wanderings, his sudden departures from homes on which he had lavished his love and his wealth, an almost casual desertion of wives and children, point to a man who was looking for something. The plays, too, suggest that in them both playwright and characters are forever searching for something: hidden treasure, the primal man, a fountain of youth, past glory or lost opportunity. But what is primarily behind these objects of longing is a relationship, once felt, then broken, always remembered with longing and ultimately sought with desperation. The object is really forgiveness, the restoration of a relationship broken by wrongs and perpetuated by deep feelings of guilt.

In the playwright's own life there was little experience of forgiveness, and it is this failure to find forgiveness which is expressed so often in his plays. Richard Leber, the poet, was distressed when he once met O'Neill, mostly by the look in the dramatist's eyes; he felt that O'Neill was a man "terribly riddled with guilt."¹ Toward the end of his life, in the reunion Eugene and Carlotta had after their bitter feud in 1951, O'Neill walked past her on his return to their apartment and said, "I love you, forgive me."² But even with this one person who

¹Louis Sheaffer, O'Neill, Son and Artist (Boston: Little, Brown, 1973), p. 605.

²Ibid., p. 657.

was close to him those last decades of his life, the one who was to him a surrogate "Mama," he was acting out this crying need to find the forgiveness he sought. O'Neill needed to express his guilt, to make penance for his sins; he even seemed to derive an almost masochistic pleasure from self-punishment.

The peace he sometimes found in the depths came from more than knowing he could sink no farther; it came also from the flagellant satisfaction of doing penance for his sins. At the same time, as a riven soul at war with himself, he was somewhat like Dorian Gray, committing greater and greater offense against his better nature in order to deaden all scruples and feelings of shame.³

It is very much the same in the plays.

O'Neill's imitation of Strindberg arose out of a sense of shared concerns. However, Strindberg's autobiographical dramas are at once bitter and guilt-ridden, filled with hatred that, as a dramatist, he was sometimes able to turn into a gesture of forgiveness toward what afflicted him. O'Neill's work is not like this. He is less concerned with the hostile external world than with that private world in which every man is isolated, as if in a cell. It is a little room, but O'Neill explored it thoroughly and with obsessive intensity.⁴

The theme is there, although not always easily recognized. The O'Neill characters seek two things, beauty and reconciliation.⁵ Lavinia is in need of pardon, although she is opposed to accepting it: "I'm not asking God or anybody for forgiveness. I forgive myself."⁶ Though Larry is guilty of gross treason to the anarchist cause, Parritt nevertheless says

³Louis Sheaffer, O'Neill, Son and Playwright (Boston: Little, Brown, 1968), p. 171.

⁴Travis Bogard, in Eugene O'Neill, The Later Plays of Eugene O'Neill (New York: Modern Library, 1967), p. viii.

⁵John Henry Raleigh, The Plays of Eugene O'Neill (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1965), p. 207.

⁶Mourning Becomes Electra, The Haunted, Act IV, Plays, II, 174.

of his mother, a leader in the cause, "Yet, she seemed to forgive you."⁷ There are always basic categories in O'Neill, including "to be forgiven, no matter what one has done, or to be damned, no matter what expiation one tries to make."⁸ His characters step into the confessional, where often the very language of the confession is echoed, and there they seek forgiveness. They "tell a confessional tale in a wasteland."⁹

While personal happiness is out of the question, . . . human integrity would consist of existing, or at least having the illusion of existing, on a plane of experience that is purposive: to be free, courageous, forgiven, committed to reality and to one's fellow man, and in communion with others. The damned then would live on illusions, are committed to nothing, and are unforgivable.¹⁰

It is clearly the damned who predominate in the plays.

It cannot be otherwise, for the characters are steeped in their own guilt. The concept of guilt in O'Neill is less drawn from the discipline of psychoanalysis than from Catholic doctrine.¹¹ Writing of Long Day's Journey into Night, Harold Clurman says:

The family's Catholicism is not so much a faith as a guilt. Because he feels guilt, O'Neill shifts between a self-pity which he despises and a burning blame which he keeps trying in this play (and his whole work) to fight off. The accusation of his own guilt and obsessive desire to purge himself of it through blame nags at him: hence the repetitiousness of phrases and scenes; it is a planned repetitiousness, often wearisome to the

⁷The Iceman Cometh, Act I, Plays, III, 589.

⁸Raleigh, p. 158.

⁹Bogard, p. xvii.

¹⁰Raleigh, p. 158.

¹¹John Howard Lawson, Theory and Techniques of Playwriting (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1936), p. 52.

reader (or the spectator) but organic to the author.¹²

Since memory "is the conveyor of guilt, the great problem of civilized man,"¹³ it is in the later, "memory plays" that this guilt wells up the greatest, where the repetition of feelings of guilt often overwhelms the audience with an almost unbearable burden of the playwright's agony.

Thus O'Neill's characters, standing by proxy for mankind itself, are haunted by their sins, mistakes, wrongdoings, betrayals. This sense of guilt forges a chain, link by link, that binds them forever to the terrible things they have done or, equally terrible, what they have not done. An inescapable determinism prevails, and the past, "sleepless with pale commemorative eyes," stands watch on the present. Since it is a fact of human life that it is often more harrowing to relive by memory a painful experience than it was to have actually undergone that experience itself in the first place, memory becomes a kind of avenging Fate or a Force that drives the characters back on themselves by its insatiable, never satisfied demands to make them continually relive the agonies of their experiences. And the play itself cannot end until the agony is complete and total.¹⁴

But O'Neill could not turn to a Father-God to deal with that sense of guilt, to find that experience of forgiveness. His Catholic background did not point him in that direction, but mediately and primarily to the Mother of God. In his personal life, too, he was wont to turn not to his father for the satisfaction of nearly all his needs and desires, but to his mother.

This is not to ignore the tremendous influence O'Neill's father had on him. Much has been written about this theme. But O'Neill seemed at last to deal with the memory of his father. In part, his attitude of

¹²Harold Clurman, "The O'Neills," Nation, CLXXXIII (March 3, 1956), 183.

¹³Raleigh, p. 201.

¹⁴Ibid.

love-hate enabled him to live with his father and with his father's memory after the elder O'Neill's death. "What he and Jamie felt, and consciously acknowledged between them, was open hostility for their father. They had repressed not the hate, but the love. Only indirectly, in the intensity of the hatred, would they show the love."¹⁵

The hostility toward his father began early. It was especially keen during his early years of schooling, when he felt not only that his father had deserted him, but was also depriving the child of the mother-love he so keenly wanted. This sense of rejection would grow along with the growing attachment for his mother. Only the death of his father seemed to temper the bitter feelings he held for him for most of his childhood and his early adult life. He wrote to a friend in 1932:

The old man and I got to be good friends and understood each other the winter before he died. . . . But in the days you speak of [1912], I was full of secret bitterness about him--not stopping to consider all he took from me and kept on smiling.¹⁶

Perhaps it was that same feeling he was describing when he wrote of Charles Marsden's reflections on his father's death in Strange Interlude (1926-27):

How old was I when I first came here? . . . six . . . with my father . . . father . . . how dim his face has grown! . . . he wanted to speak to me just before he died . . . the hospital . . . smell of iodoform in the cool halls . . . hot summer . . . I bent down . . . his voice had withdrawn so far away . . . I couldn't understand him . . . what son can ever understand! . . . always too near, too soon, too distant or too late! . . .¹⁷

¹⁵Doris Alexander, The Tempering of Eugene O'Neill (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1962), p. 84.

¹⁶Arthur and Barbara Gelb, O'Neill (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), p. 218.

¹⁷Act I, Plays, I, 4.

O'Neill would find a certain amount of satisfaction in father substitutes during his life. Terry Carlin proved a "fatherly mentor" to him,¹⁸ and likely his literary influences, such as Nietzsche and Strindberg, provided some feeling of relationship with his father's generation. But it seemed possible for O'Neill to deal with his feelings for his father, far more possible than with those feelings he had for his mother. With the father, he could deal with his theater:

I suppose if one accepts the song and dance complete of the psychoanalysts, it is perfectly natural that having been brought up around the old conventional theater, and having identified it with my father, I should rebel and go in a new direction.¹⁹

Although there are portraits of fathers that are important in the dramas--Desire Under the Elms (1924), Long Day's Journey (1940-41) and A Touch of the Poet (1940), for example--it was an easier thing to put to rest the memory of his father than the memory of his mother. There was a conscious attack on the theater of his father. The playwright's own theater aimed at the destruction of the melodrama and the kind of theater that served chiefly to provide a vehicle for the matinee idol, such as his father was. And the success he won offered the satisfaction that his attack could never go unnoticed.

One cannot deny the importance of the theme of the father as it appears in the plays. In one sense, O'Neill always seemed obliged "to consider the patriarchal and matriarchal forces together in relation to the same problem, if not always with equal emphasis in the same play,

¹⁸Gelb, p. 287.

¹⁹Ibid., p. 451.

at least in plays closely associated."²⁰ The idea of the father occupied O'Neill the writer, it is true. In a revealing line, Dion Anthony of The Great God Brown (1925) says of his father: "This Mr. Anthony is my father, but he only imagines he is God the Father."²¹ But there is also there a certain denial of the claim of the father upon the son: "What aliens we were to each other! When he lay dead, his face looked so familiar that I wondered where I had met that man before. Only at the second of my conception. After that, we grew hostile with concealed shame."²² O'Neill dealt with the father in his works somewhat as he did in his own personal life. The father, whether an earthly father or the idea of God the Father, O'Neill managed to confront and lay to rest.

If Nietzsche stimulated O'Neill's imagination and helped him to release his inhibitions and write of deeply personal feelings, Freud and Jung illuminated the results. O'Neill knew the work of the analytic psychologists but, in perfect sincerity I think, denied their influence. His position was that of other writers before Freud became known outside his profession, writers of fiction and of drama who concerned themselves with the idea of father-son enmity, mother-son affection. Nevertheless, Freud's speculations on the origins of religion and morality in Totem and Taboo . . . had an interesting relevance to the work of O'Neill. In that study Freud reconstructed the conditions of the primal horde, described a rebellion of the sons against a violent primal father who stood in the way of their sexual demands and of their desire for power. It was evident to Freud that, after the idea of God appeared, he was "in every case modelled after the father and that our personal relation to god is depended upon our relation to our physical father, fluctuating and changing with him, and that god at bottom is nothing but an exalted father." The revolt was not of Satan but of the son, who was related to earlier conceptions of a god who had "enjoyed the favors of maternal deities and committed incest with the mother in defiance of the father," finally

²⁰Ernest G. Griffin, Eugene O'Neill (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1976), p. 17.

²¹Prologue, Plays, III, 260.

²²Act I, Scene 3, Plays, III, 282.

murdering the latter. In O'Neill's play [Desire Under the Elms] if the old God--the Father--is not yet dead, it is not because the son hadn't tried to kill him.²³

It was not the father, but the mother, that continued to haunt him.

Henceforth O'Neill was to find meaning for guilt and sin. They were associated only with the Mother. On the other hand, so also were the supreme human needs, love and peace. Love was mother love, peace was in the womb.²⁴

It was there he would seek happiness, in mother-love, and there, too, that he would suffer the agony of the realization of the failure of his search. Thus, O'Neill turned to woman as object of the quest. In his personal life, it meant a life-long pursuit of a sense of reconciliation, first with his mother, and then with her memory.

In the plays, woman is primary. Even when what happens in an O'Neill drama happens to a man, it is usually the relation of that man to woman that makes the play. His plots "depend repeatedly on exposing the dilemma of women in their relationship with men."²⁵ Or, perhaps more accurately, it might be said it is of the dilemmas faced by men in the male-female relationships. His treatment of this "primary polar relationship"²⁶ certainly can be criticized for a manner that is often simplistic.

²³Edwin A. Engel, "Ideas in the Plays of Eugene O'Neill," Drama: Selected Papers from the English Institute (New York: Columbia University Press, 1964), reprinted in Griffin, p. 26.

²⁴Ibid., p. 31.

²⁵Lois S. Josephs, "The Women of Eugene O'Neill: Sex Role Stereotype," Ball State University Forum, XIV (Summer 1973), 4.

²⁶Raleigh, p. 118.

In O'Neill, everything seems to render down to romance or sex, despite the fact that the author has an extremely naive conception of sexuality. One has only to note his puerile sentimentalization of whores, his romantic idealization of chaste women--or still worse, his laughable ideas about extramarital affairs, exposed in that fantastic Strange Interlude scene where Darrell and Nina cold-bloodedly decide to mate only to produce a child, and discuss the liaison in the third person for the sake of scientific impartiality.²⁷

Yet, it can hardly be said that O'Neill is attempting the treatment of what might be called normal male-female relationships. The woman "compounded of virtues and failings, the usual stuff of human nature, is rare in his writings."²⁸ With the background of his biography in mind, one could hardly expect that his dramas would exhibit any more normality in such relationships than had existed in his personal life. His own experience consisted of two extremes, mother-love and sex with prostitutes--he admitted to Carlotta his inability for more normal sexuality. So in the dramas relationships between the sexes gravitate

. . . between two extremes, a fervent idealization of its blisses and a mordant critique of its insuperabilities. Under the one dispensation, marriage or love, is a perpetual felicity; under the other they are both impossible; and, of course, the two attitudes often merge in the same play, as they do in A Touch of the Poet and Long Day's Journey into Night.²⁹

But never are these relationships, although intense and meaningful, ultimately creative or satisfying.

²⁷Robert Brustein, The Theater of Revolt (Boston: Little, Brown, 1964), p. 335. He adds that "sex in O'Neill remains without complexity, darkness, or genuine passion, the mentalized fantasy of an adolescent temperament, and totally incompatible with the portentous philosophical attitudes it is meant to support" (p. 336).

²⁸Sheaffer, Son and Artist, p. 500.

²⁹Raleigh, p. 118.

Nearly always the primary relationship he is writing about is that of mother and son. "The deepest emotional drive in his plays is always based on the father-daughter, mother-son relationship."³⁰ This old theme of "the mother-son affinity"³¹ is primarily that, for daughters show a striking independence from their fathers; it is sons embroiled in the Oedipal relationships who serve as heroes of the plays.

The primary image of Eugene O'Neill that emerges from his writings is that of an eternal son, a man constantly examining and dramatizing his ambivalent feelings toward his mother and father, forever bound to them emotionally, a man never able to mature fully, never free to be a real parent himself.³²

It is this haunting memory of his mother that could not die for O'Neill. As true as this was of that image in the church--the Virgin Mother, behind whom and through whom was God the Father--it was even more painfully true of his own mother. The way she treated both Eugene and Jamie, doted on them, undoubtedly created much of this tremendous hold she had on her two sons. When Jamie was born, he provided the companionship his father could not provide for Ella O'Neill while the senior James was at the theater. She "devoted herself to Jamie with a love so intense and so protective that Jamie would be bound to her for the rest of his life."³³ A decade later, when Eugene was born, she

. . . cherished the baby with a fiercely protective love.
Never for an instant would she let this last baby out of her

³⁰Lawson, p. 130.

³¹Robert Bechtold Heilman, The Iceman, the Arsonist, and the Troubled Agent (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1973), p. 100.

³²Sheaffer, Son and Artist, pp. 49f.

³³Alexander, p. 11.

sight. She was always a beautiful, gentle presence watching over him. This was the woman Eugene O'Neill grew up calling "Mama."³⁴

Eugene could speak of his mother, as Jamie commonly did, as "my sainted mother."³⁵

Eugene was given to romanticizing his mother. She was naturally a romantic figure to the child, beautiful and devoted as she was. But when that picture was shattered by the knowledge of her addiction, O'Neill created a myth to preserve the image of his mother from the same hatred he felt for his father. "When he thought of his mother, he liked to see her as a kind of enchanted princess--pure and sweet and unde-filed--but captive in the castle of the wicked giant."³⁶ As a student, she had cut a romantic figure in the convent, "looked up to by students and teachers alike as the most pious girl in the place."³⁷ It was this idyllic image O'Neill tried to encapsulate in his romantic view of his mother. In this were the seeds of much of his own anxiety.

Generally speaking, men who romanticize women are impelled by fear or dislike or a combination of both. Unable to give women their just due, they disguise their prejudice, especially from themselves, in a flattering attitude; but the end result is that they leave their idolized ones a small margin for error, scant latitude in which to be fallibly human. These romanticists set the stage, in other words, for their own disillusionment.³⁸

³⁴Ibid., p. 15.

³⁵Sheaffer, Son and Artist, p. 106.

³⁶Alexander, p. 98.

³⁷Barrett H. Clark, Eugene O'Neill (New York: Dover, 1947), p. 11.

³⁸Sheaffer, Son and Artist, pp. 500f.

O'Neill tended to venerate his mother as a devout believer might venerate a pious woman who had taken holy orders. The memories he had of his own cloistered early school days he would attach to his mother's student days at the convent. "In the works of Eugene O'Neill, the ideas of 'nun' and 'mother' very often go together. He was an Irishman, and the Virgin Mother composed an image he could not do without."³⁹ "When he portrayed his mother directly in Long Day's Journey into Night, he created a similar myth, showing her as a simple convent girl, misled into marriage, but still a child and pure: a virgin mother."⁴⁰

The mother in the plays is nearly always based somehow on Eugene O'Neill's own mother. The names of the characters show the playwright's remarkable versatility in using the same names over and over without ever seeming repetitious.⁴¹ While his mother commonly went by the name Ella, her full name was Mary Ellen Quinlan O'Neill. "Mary" would be that name known in Ireland even today as her "Water Name." It might also be noted that Eugene had, in preferring to use the name Mary in the plays, made use of the practice that still is common in Catholic countries today, as in Ireland and Mexico, for example, where many girls are given the name Mary along with another name, the one by which they are usually known.⁴²

³⁹Eric Bentley in Perry Miller (ed.) Major Writers of America II (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1962), p. 558.

⁴⁰Alexander, p. 98.

⁴¹See especially Egil Törnqvist, "Personal Nomenclature in the Plays of O'Neill," Modern Drama, VIII (February 1966), 362-373.

⁴²Harry Slowchower connects the recurring use of the letter "M" in O'Neill's plays with Mother/Mother Church. "Eugene O'Neill's Lost Moderns," No Voice Wholly Lost (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1945), quoted in Oscar Cargill, N. Bryllion Fagin and William J. Fisher (eds.) O'Neill and His Plays (New York: New York University Press, 1961), p. 338.

Yet it is not just his mother's name he is employing in the plays, for it reflects the name of the Virgin Mary, the Mother of God.

Consequently, the image of woman that was to influence Eugene O'Neill so greatly was a complex picture composed, among other things, of his feelings toward his own mother, her own attitudes toward self and toward the Virgin Mary, and the author's response both to his own religious training and to his mother's confused ideas about vocation. Perhaps no one could have been more highly influenced by the cult of the Virgin than the son of a devout Irish mother at the turn of the century. It was during the century that enclosed his life that Mariology made the tremendous leaps that brought it to its present state. In 1854, the dogma of the Immaculate Conception was proclaimed. The year 1945 was marked as a special Marian Year, and in 1950 the dogma of Mary's Assumption was proclaimed. In 1964, she was declared Mater Ecclesiae. Mary was at last enthroned in her present high position, sinless, the Mother of all the faithful and the chief mediator, after Christ himself, of the grace of God. To add to the influence this developing portrait of the Virgin must have had on the young O'Neill was the constant presence, during the elementary years, of the sisters who were both teachers and surrogate mothers to the child, and likely may have appeared to the impressionable child as so many incarnations of "The Mother of God." How complex and far-reaching was---and is---the Mariology of the present century can only be suggested here.⁴³

⁴³The recent, excellent volume on the historical development and present significance of the cult of Mary details this growth and its meaning; see Marina Warner, Alone of All Her Sex (New York: Knopf, 1976).

Especially significant in the concept of the Virgin Mary is the complex notion that has grown up around the need to see her as a mother who surely gave birth but at the same time remained "Ever Virgin."

Mary is mother and virgin; since the sixth century, when the marvelous Akathistos hymn hailed her as the one creature in whom all opposites are reconciled, her virgin motherhood has been the chief sign of her supernatural nature. Metaphysical mysteries must defy reason, for if the human mind could encompass them, they would lose their sacred character. So Christ the God-man and Mary the Virgin-Mother blot out all antinomy, absolve contradiction, and manifest that the impossible is possible with God.⁴⁴

One of the marks of Old Testament theology is that of stripping from the idea of God all vestiges of a sexual nature, save for use of the masculine gender in language referring to the deity. This was, of course, in stark contrast to the theologies of nearly all the nations around Israel. Even he who was the Son of God and Son of Man has been carefully guarded by Christian theology as a kind of sexless creature, and any work which suggests otherwise--witness Nikos Kazantzakis' The Last Temptation of Christ--is immediately attacked for its suggestions. With Mary, though, there is the need to maintain the two ideas in tension. There is a sense in which Mary can even be viewed as "Bride," as well as Virgin and Mother.⁴⁵ "The principle of analogy holds fast in much of Mariology, and if consecrated virgins believed themselves the bride of Christ, then celibate priests and clerics might well imagine themselves the grooms of Mary."⁴⁶

There was even a fourteenth-century song in which Mary asked of

⁴⁴Ibid., p. 336.

⁴⁵See Part III, "Bride," Ibid.

⁴⁶Ibid., p. 156.

the monks: "Take me for thy wife."

Yet, it is likely that in the office of mediatrix Mary holds greatest sway over the lives of men. It is surely true that there remains something ultimately inexplicable about the cult of Mary, as Warner maintains.

I do not think it is adequate to say that the men will always yearn for a pure mother who will never let them down, and that that is why the Virgin Mary flourishes; one has to ask why purity and motherliness have been defined the way they have in the case of the Virgin and accept the fact that the ultimate reasons for her hegemony can never be fully understood.⁴⁷

However this power came about, Mary's rule as mediatrix makes it unlikely that her cult can ever "be emptied of moral significance, and thus lose its present real powers to heal and to harm."⁴⁸ For these present purposes, at least, it is clear that this cult of the Virgin was a great influence on Mary Ellen O'Neill, and had a considerable influence on her son as well.

Yet, O'Neill saw the Virgin Mary always through his own mother. It was her forgiveness he sought when he felt its need, her touch of grace he demanded, even as Jamie Tyrone in A Moon for the Misbegotten (1943)--really more an alter ego for the playwright than the older brother himself--was so desperate for his deceased mother's pardon. Throughout his life, even after his own mother's death, O'Neill was looking for a mother to forgive him.

As O'Neill was to write of his family over and over again (and hardly only in the later autobiographical plays), he was writing as the

⁴⁷Ibid., p. xxiv.

⁴⁸Ibid., p. 339.

eternal son, who never really left his parents. And when his parents were gone, he would look life-long for a mother-wife who could fill that void, and meet that deeply-felt need for pardon.

O'Neill married three times. From what has been published on the subject, it would seem clear that he looked less for a wife than for a mother--looked, indeed, for the image of the young Ella Quinlan whom he had never known--and that he thought sometimes, in his second and third marriages, that he had found her. It would seem, too, that he was greatly loved by his wives but experienced utmost difficulty in accepting love.⁴⁹

In the mid-twenties, O'Neill participated in a study of marriage, in exchange for several weeks of professional analysis. The study was described in a popular volume entitled, What's Wrong with Marriage, by Gilbert V. Hamilton and Kenneth Macgowan.⁵⁰ The title of one of the chapters would seem to suggest much about O'Neill and women: "Blaming Wives for the Sins of the Parents." In an analysis of O'Neill's earliest play, A Wife for a Life, Carpenter writes:

The actual pattern of his own three marriages may fairly be described, without irony, as "Three Wives for Three Lives." Because the first period of his life was rebellious and destructive, his first marriage was hardly a marriage at all. His first wife was, figuratively, an image of purity who existed in order to be destroyed. His second wife naturally became the opposite--an image of love unlimited, herself an artist, beyond convention and beyond society. But, as he became famous and as he became older, he needed to be protected both from society and from his own weaknesses. Therefore his third wife became an image of worldly sophistication. His three wives satisfied the needs of his three lives.⁵¹

At the same time, all his adult life, O'Neill seemed to be

⁴⁹Bentley, p. 559.

⁵⁰The original study, by Dr. Hamilton alone, was entitled A Research in Marriage (1929).

⁵¹Frederic I. Carpenter, Eugene O'Neill (New York: Twayne, 1964), p. 38.

actively in search for the wife that could be the mother he needed. When, at the age of twenty-six, O'Neill was courting eighteen-year-old Beatrice Ashe of New London, he often referred to her as "Mother," and once wrote to her: "I feel the impulse of the tired child who runs to his mother's arms and lays his head upon her breast, and sobs for no reason at all. Be my mother! Let me place my head on My Place and weep out my woes, Soul Mother of Mine."⁵²

Agnes Boulton, his second wife, was to be treated as a mother also. Unwilling even when they first met to share her with other "children," O'Neill was disappointed to discover the secret she kept from him for some time: she was widowed and had a child. O'Neill had found her so "alone and virginal."⁵³ He once said to someone in the Hell Hole dive in Greenwich that what he wanted in a woman was "mistress, wife, mother, and valet."⁵⁴ Bessie Breuer, novelist and editor, who visited Eugene and Agnes at Spithead, remarked that Agnes was to him "as much a sister as a woman could be."⁵⁵ His treatment of her seemed more as if she were, not sister, but a surrogate mother. He once chided her: "No more lecture letters, please! You never used to be a moralist, and I've never in my life stood for that stuff, even from my Mother."⁵⁶ He once

⁵²Sheaffer, Son and Artist, p. 170.

⁵³Sheaffer, Son and Playwright, p. 407.

⁵⁴Agnes Boulton, Part of a Long Story (New York: Doubleday, 1958), p. 63.

⁵⁵Croswell Bowen, The Curse of the Misbegotten (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1959), p. 170.

⁵⁶Sheaffer, Son and Playwright, p. 474.

described to her a recurrent vision he had had for years, in which he was a child, and there were only the child and "one other," one he never quite saw but who as a "presence" made him feel complete.⁵⁷ A poem he wrote appeared to make a connection between Agnes and the notion of the substitute mother:

And Nero said to Me:
 "Oh, yes, my mother was a good woman
 And I only killed her because--
 (How vague time makes one!)--well,
 Because she had a wart on her chin
 And because I was God!
 Don't you think it's a bit degrading of God
 To have a mother? . . .⁵⁸

O'Neill was apparently making a reference to Agnes, who had a wart on her chin.

In one sense, O'Neill seemed to see in Agnes not just a kind of mother but one in competition with his own mother, who died nearly four years after Agnes and Eugene were married. While he was never above hitting Agnes--he once knocked her off her feet in the Hell Hole when he suspected her of flirting with another man--the night before she was to meet O'Neill's parents for the first time he struck her, for no apparent reason.⁵⁹ When she once wore a black lace mantilla that had belonged to his mother, he tore it from her head and told her to "Go back to the gutter you came from!"⁶⁰

From all available evidence, it appears that in the ten

⁵⁷Ibid., p. 67.

⁵⁸Sheaffer, Son and Artist, p. 178.

⁵⁹Boulton, p. 225.

⁶⁰Sheaffer, Son and Artist, p. 97.

years O'Neill and Agnes were together he never, except toward the end, was unfaithful to her. Not because he was so content in his marriage, but, apparently, because sex in itself did not tempt him sufficiently for him to complicate his life with an affair or even a brief fling; he wanted regularity and peace for his work. While his letters to Agnes suggest a passionate lover, he was not, according to her, particularly sensual. The ironic thing about their relationship was that although he yearned for total union with her, he basically was unsuited for it, unable to give wholeheartedly of himself not only to Agnes but to any woman. A man of contradictory impulses and needs, with a strain of misogyny, he would always keep a crucial part of himself remote, secret, untouchable.⁶¹

Thus, it was hardly to satisfy sensual desires that the playwright chose to leave his second wife and their two children to marry the actress, Carlotta Monterey. It was with her that he displayed this search for a mother substitute most clearly. He apparently saw in her "a protecting mother, a woman who could understand and requite his desperate need for maternal affection."⁶² She was, in looks, strikingly like his mother, and he mentioned to Agnes—who remembered the remark only later when a relationship had already developed between O'Neill and Carlotta—that Carlotta had eyes like his mother's. During their courtship, Carlotta was struck by the manner in which O'Neill would say to her, "I need you, I need you"—not "I love you." O'Neill, with yet another of the remains of his Catholic upbringing, had no easy time persuading himself that his need for Carlotta was great enough for him to leave Agnes and their two children, for he retained a strong, very Catholic belief in the sanctity of marriage. Still, he convinced himself that Agnes and he no longer loved each other, and so he felt free to take

⁶¹Ibid., p. 164.

⁶²Bowen, p. 177.

this woman he would call "Mother."

Commonly, their address to each other stressed this mother-son relationship. She once told Saxe Commins, "This lover of mine is also my child."⁶³ While awaiting the completion of their Sea Island, Georgia, home, O'Neill took time from his writing to address an impassioned note to her:

. . . Mistress, I desire you, you are my passion, and my life-drunkenness, and my ecstasy, and the wine of joy to me! Wife, you are my love, and my happiness, and the word behind my word, and the half of my heart! Mother, you are my lost way refound, my end and my beginning, the hand I reach out for in my lonely night, from my ghost-haunted inner dark, and on your soft breasts there is a peace for me that is beyond death!⁶⁴

In the inscription for one of the copies of Mourning Becomes Electra (1929-31), O'Neill wrote: "Oh, mother and wife and mistress and friend! And collaborator! I love you!"⁶⁵ Carlotta once wrote of the task it was "looking after this child,"⁶⁶ and affectionately called him "Poppa." Others recognized this relationship, and the actress Lillian Gish remarked that Carlotta looked after him like a mother, that they "really didn't seem to need anyone else."⁶⁷

Carlotta seemed to relish her position. Of their first meetings, she was to comment later: "Well, that's what got me in all my

⁶³ Sheaffer, Son and Artist, p. 305.

⁶⁴ Gelb, p. 760.

⁶⁵ Croswell Bowen, "The Black Irishman," PM (November 3, 1946), reprinted in Cargill, p. 77.

⁶⁶ Sheaffer, Son and Artist, p. 409.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 343.

trouble with O'Neill--my maternal instinct came out."⁶⁸ She protected him as a mother might--even from his closest friends. The homes they chose, and especially those they built, seemed designed to isolate him and enable her to offer him that maternal protection. During his last illness he once reached out of his bed, took Carlotta's hand and said, "You're my Mama, now." She demurred, but he insisted. And of it she said later, "And you know, I really was--his mother, wife, mistress, secretary, everything. He was always looking for a mother."⁶⁹ Of her protective instincts toward O'Neill, Marc Connally was to note after the artist's death--while Carlotta still lived out her last days as a recluse in New York:

Carlotta lives in an "ivory" mind. . . . She made herself into a necessity for Gene. Wives of writers are as predatory as anything you know. It's just a way for them--and Carlotta especially-- to justify their existence near a famous husband in this sort of stewardship. . . . For the rest, she dressed herself up in an attitude of dedication. O'Neill was always sort of a submerged fellow, and the progression of his illness did not help any against this tendency, and Carlotta completed the job by practically wrapping Gene up in swaddling clothes.⁷⁰

Beyond this search for a human mother who might forgive was the memory of another mother, who could surely be depended upon to forgive, for, closely allied with these feelings about his mother and the wives he took as mother-substitutes were his feelings toward the Virgin Mother. When he discovered his mother's addiction, he fell back on his Catholic training; he sought her cure in his own trusting faith, certain, at

⁶⁸Ibid., p. 234.

⁶⁹Ibid., pp. 669f.

⁷⁰T. H. Wenning, "Dead Man Triumphant," Newsweek, 1L (June 17, 1957), 68.

first, that God and the Virgin would not fail him.

In her sweetness, her overflowing goodness, she was incapable of withholding her favour if approached with the right courtesies and the correct salutations. The bond of motherhood that attached her to her son and to the whole human race through him presupposed a natural law of inalienable, irreducible, indestructible love. All the antiphons that pealed from the choir beseeching her to save us were, despite their imploring words, so much praise and thanksgiving. She did not really need to be asked.⁷¹

But even the Mother of God failed him, sending him on a life of creating artistic worlds where the kindness of the mother might be sought.

The search for the mother, for someone who could provide what both mother and Mother of God might provide, takes several different directions in the plays. One of these directions is a longing for the ideal woman. In one of his earliest plays, Bound East for Cardiff (1914), Yank, dying at sea, has a vision of "A pretty lady dressed in black." Smitty, of the sea play In the Zone (1916-17), is at sea because of his addiction to alcohol and because his girl--an ideal woman--would not marry him as long as he drank. In The Moon of the Caribbees (1916-17), Smitty is again depicted as the morose seaman whose ideal woman will not have him. In Servitude (1913-14), Alice Royston, wife of a playwright-novelist, is a devoted wife who proves her worth in life by the ideal woman's attitude toward her husband: servitude--a common notion in O'Neill about the proper place of woman. Throughout the plays, from the stereotypes of the earliest plays through such ideal women as Nora in A Touch of the Poet (1940) and Evelyn in The Iceman Cometh (1939), there is a quest for a relationship with the ideal woman, a quest that inevitably ends in frustration, usually because of the failure of the ideal

⁷¹Warner, p. xx.

woman to forgive, or of the hero to accept forgiveness. Thus the restoration of the desired relationship between the yearning protagonist and his ideal woman is never realized.

In a similar vein, O'Neill often wrote of salvation by marriage. This is especially notable in the case of two of the plays that coincided with the playwright's two later marriages. In the earlier of these two plays, Welded (1922-23), there is reflected the relationship with the second wife, Agnes Boulton. The play is written in three acts, the first and third set in the studio apartment of Michael and Eleanor Cape. He is a playwright, she an actress. Each has not only his own career, but a strong, almost private personality. But it is only in their relationship that they find the necessary meaning they desire for their lives, yet this relationship is constantly faltering ever on the brink of a disastrous end. After a separation in which Michael has been working on a play, they are reunited as Act I begins. But they do not get along much better than before, at least after the first moments of greeting, and so each goes his separate way at the end of the act, in an attempt to seek out another lover and so spite the mate. She goes to the home of an old friend, one she claims in front of Michael has already been a lover to her; Michael seeks out the company of a prostitute. In Act II, each fails, in separate scenes, to find any satisfaction in their proposed affairs, and in the final act they are together again, still no happier with each other, but with a resolution that somehow their marriage will thrive. In the final moments of the play, the theme of salvation through love is depicted by their movements.

CAPE: My wife! (His eyes fixed on her as he ascends.
As he does so her arms move back until they are

stretched out straight to right and left, forming a cross. CAPE stops two steps below her--in a low, wondering tone) Why do you stand like that? (her head, thrown back, her eyes shut--slowly, dreamily) Perhaps I'm praying. I don't know. I love.

CAPE: (deeply moved) I love you.

ELEANOR: (as if from a great distance) We love! (He moves close to her and his hands reach out for hers. For a moment as their hands touch they form together one cross. Then their arms go about each other and their lips meet.)⁷²

In Days Without End (1931-34) O'Neill wrote similarly of the relationship with his third wife, Carlotta Monterey. She regarded the play as a symbol of their life together, and considered it "Gene's hymn of love for her."⁷³ When criticisms of the religious character of the play, and especially the ending, poured forth, Carlotta was very irate, since she saw the play in the light of the redemptive nature of marriage. The play does more, though, for it unites the nature of marriage with the religious, Catholic theme. It "reconciles O'Neill and Carlotta's love-hate by surrendering to Catholicism."⁷⁴ It is the threatened destruction of the marriage of the two characters of the play, Elsa and John Loving, that leads ultimately to the altar of the church and John's saving act of contrition before it.

Another theme relating to the idea of Virgin-Mother in the works is the notion of God the Mother. It is in what O'Neill called his "woman play," Strange Interlude (1926-27), that he developed this idea. Nina,

⁷²Act III, Plays, II, 489.

⁷³Sheaffer, Son and Artist, p. 426.

⁷⁴J. William Miller, Modern Playwrights at Work (London: French, 1968), p. 305.

the heroine of the nine-act play--the first of several "outsized" plays--lives a quarter of a century of her life in the course of the play's action. The daughter of a puritanical professor, she denies herself the wish of marrying her aviator-sweetheart until the war is over, at her father's request. The sweetheart is killed and Nina, after a wild fling nursing both the wounds and the lusts of hospitalized servicemen, marries a simple but devoted man, Sam Evans. Fearful of having his child, because of insanity in his blood line, she has an abortion and bears instead--unknown to her simple husband--the child of a doctor friend.

As with many heroines in O'Neill (and in the unconscious wishes of his own mother), Nina recovers her lost purity. She becomes, as it were, a virgin once again. Even after the legitimate pregnancy by her husband, she must return to a state of innocence somehow. She has an abortion, and so effects that "never-ending reincarnation of the eternal feminine."⁷⁵ It becomes possible for her to be virginal again, with her "cool, clean body" once again, a kind of eternal purity that can make her son, years later, find it quite impossible to believe that his mother could ever commit adultery. "There is a sense of overriding femininity, of 'Eve triumphant.'"⁷⁶ She is another Eve, a "mother of all living."

Because of the cruelty and capriciousness of God the Father--she says, "Yes, God the Father, I hear you laughing"--⁷⁷ who is at various times judgmental, almighty or merely amused in his attitudes toward men,

⁷⁵ Alice Evelyn Phillips, "Strange Interlude and the Blah Brotherhood," Drama, XIX (March 1929), 174.

⁷⁶ Griffin, p. 16.

⁷⁷ Act IX, Plays, I, 194.

Nina gravitates toward a concept of God the Mother.

As he had earlier in Desire Under the Elms, O'Neill here sees man's religious experience in terms of an opposition of God the Father and God the Mother. For Nina, when God the Mother rules, she can believe and feel; when God the Father takes command she can do neither. The indifference of God the Father leaves her empty but the life rhythms of God the Mother enable her to feel desire. For the men, when she is in the latter phase, Nina is more than a sexually desirable woman. She is, insofar as she can be so represented, God the Mother in her own person.⁷⁸

Nina concludes that God should properly have been a mother instead of a father.

The mistake began when God was created in a male image. Of course, women would see him that way, but men should have been gentlemen enough, remembering their mothers, to make God a woman! But the God of Gods--the Boss--has always been a man. That makes life so perverted, and death so unnatural. We should have imagined life as created in the birth-pain of God the Mother. Then we would understand why we, Her children, have inherited pain, for we would know that our life's rhythm beats from her great heart, torn with the agony of love and birth. And we would feel that death meant reunion with Her, a passing back into Her substance, blood of Her blood again, peace of Her peace! . . . Now wouldn't that be more logical and satisfying than having God a male whose chest thunders with egotism and is too hard for tired heads and thoroughly comfortable?⁷⁹

The mother-image is the life of the internal world and the father-image is the death of the external.⁸⁰ God is a Mother.

Beyond this, Nina herself takes on the character of God the Mother. As she ponders her condition before the birth of her son Gordon, she thinks:

⁷⁸Travis Bogard, Contour in Time (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), pp. 312f.

⁷⁹Act II, Plays, I, 42f.

⁸⁰Leonard Chabrowe, Ritual and Pathos (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1976), p. 137.

Not Ned's child! . . . not Sam's child! . . . mine! . . .
there! . . . again! . . . I feel my child live . . . moving in
my life . . . my life moving in my child . . . breathing in the
tide I dream and breathe my dream back into the tide. . . God
is a Mother. . . .⁸¹

All life is contained within her as in the maternal sea.⁸²

The relationship of all the men in the play to Nina is clearly
of a sexual nature.⁸³ She is "an archetypal woman who commands the
devotion of her trinity of men."⁸⁴ Nina says of her men:

My three men! . . . I feel their desires converge in me! . . . to
form one complete beautiful male desire which I absorb . . . and
am whole . . . they dissolve in me, their life is my life . . . I
am pregnant with the three! . . . husband! . . . lover! . . .
father! . . . and the fourth man! . . . little man! . . . little
Gordon! . . . he is mine too! . . . that makes it perfect! . . .⁸⁵

It is in the same play that another of the ideas O'Neill uses
about the Virgin Mother, the Virgin Birth, appears. Surely, the imagery
of the trinity in the play cannot have been conceived here apart from the
ideas of the Virgin Birth in Christianity. There is a simple, almost
peasant-like husband, Sam Evans, who never really understands what has
happened in the strange birth of this child. Nina once prays to God the
Mother that some day "this fool" might be told the truth about his "son."
But Sam lovingly and devotedly provides for this child which is not his.

⁸¹Act V, Plays, I, 109f.

⁸²Chabrowe, p. 137.

⁸³Otis W. Winchester, "Eugene O'Neill's Strange Interlude as a
Transcript of America in the 1920's," from Literature and History (Tulsa:
University of Tulsa, 1970), reprinted in Griffin, p. 70.

⁸⁴Ruby Cohn, Dialogue in American Drama (Bloomington: Indiana
University Press, 1971), p. 28.

⁸⁵Act VI, Plays, I, 135.

But the child is not born of the liaison of god and virgin, as it would have happened in pagan myth. There is a God who hovers over the scene-- Marsden, the aging family friend--but there is no union with the woman. Instead, there is a "spiritual" conception, for the relationship that surrounds the affair at the time Nina becomes pregnant is an almost impersonal one, and the two lovers surround the act itself with a kind of antiseptic formality. Nina calls him "Doctor" as they agree to mate, and he sees his part as devotion to science. She thinks of it as "a friendly act for all concerned,"⁸⁶ and, as one might address the Madonna, he calls her "Madame." The child that is born is named after the hero from the past, and--unlike the Jesus of the Gospels--never does he learn anything of his true origin, although, as in the case of Sam, Nina once prays the Mother God that she might some day be able to tell her son the truth, that he might learn to love his real father.

The imagery of the Virgin Birth, it might be noted, appears again in A Moon for the Misbegotten (1943). Josie, the rough-talking daughter of the tenant on the Tyrone farm, spends the night with a drunken Jamie Tyrone on her lap, striking a pose of the Pieta. Though reputed to have slept with many of the men of the area, Josie is really a virgin. So, after a night of holding the drunken form of Jamie like this, she says, mysteriously, to her father:

JOSIE: . . . There's nothing. Nothing at all. (She smiles strangely) Except a great miracle they'd never believe, or you either.
 HOGAN: What miracle?
 JOSIE: A virgin who bears a dead child in the night, and

⁸⁶Act IV, Plays, I, 87.

the dawn finds her still a virgin. If that isn't a miracle, what is?⁸⁷

Deborah, in More Stately Mansions (1938), is also a Virgin Mother figure. The resentment she feels at maternity and the loss of her virgin character, however, points in the direction of the ultimate failure of the Virgin Mother to provide the satisfaction of forgiveness and the communion of the forgiven that is so longed for in the heroes of O'Neill. This particular God the Mother is unusually possessive. "One cannot help being jealous. It is a part of the curse of love."⁸⁸ So says Deborah to her daughter-in-law Sara, and her son Simon would agree: "An amusing example of the insatiable ambition of female possessiveness."⁸⁹ But God the Mother will always be herself, and in the closing scene of the play, before Deborah enters into her dream world of the summer-house, she is clearly a vision of the Virgin Mary. She looks like a great princess on her grand estate, is "beautiful and serene, and many years younger."⁹⁰ Sara addresses her as "Your Majesty" and, repeatedly, as "My Lady" (Madonna). When Sara grabs her arm, Deborah cries, "Do not presume to touch me!"⁹¹ And to "My Lady" Sara says, "And God bless you."⁹² Surely the playwright could not have been

⁸⁷Eugene O'Neill, A Moon for the Misbegotten (New York: Vintage, 1974), Act IV, p. 103.

⁸⁸Eugene O'Neill, More Stately Mansions (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1964), Act II, Scene 3, p. 124.

⁸⁹*Ibid.*, Act III, Scene 2, p. 173.

⁹⁰*Ibid.*, p. 191.

⁹¹*Ibid.*, p. 193.

⁹²*Ibid.*

deaf to the sounds echoing from his past: "Hail, Mary, full of grace! Blessed art Thou among women!"

But Deborah has already proven herself the reluctant Virgin Mother. She curses not only her own birth, but "the day I indifferently conceived, the day I bore--"⁹³ Here is the anguish of the lost virginity, and for it she is indifferent to her son and dispossesses him.

Even when O'Neill held to the romanticized vision of his own mother, once the image had been shattered there was that strong feeling of disillusionment that never left him. He, too, had felt dispossessed when he learned of the marred image that was his own mother, the lost purity of the sainted mother who turned out to be a dope addict. For the rest of his life, it was to play upon his mind; at the time of his mother's burial it was the chief thing on his mind as he unburdened himself to a friend. As he was to write in Long Day's Journey: "God, it made everything in life seem rotten!" It was not what was expected of pious mothers, saints and images of the Mother of God. "Christ, I'd never dreamed before that any women but whores took dope."⁹⁴ O'Neill took this as a personal rejection by his mother. It was the dispossession from all in which he had dared trust, a mark of his mother's indifference toward him.

Such dispossession appears in many of the works as the failure of forgiveness. As previously seen, O'Neill in his own early life connected the idea of forgiveness with the Mother of God, the Virgin Mary.

⁹³ Ibid., Act II, Scene 2, p. 102.

⁹⁴ Eugene O'Neill, Long Day's Journey into Night (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1950), Act IV, p. 163.

In Catholicism, her throne is the place of pardon, for she has greatest access to Christ, and Christ the greatest access to God the Father. She becomes the object of the quest, the quest for forgiveness from the mother.

In The Great God Brown (1925), Dion Anthony, like so many O'Neill men, is in search of the mother who can forgive. To begin with, he does not get along well with his own mother, or father either, from early in life. Of the influence they try to have on his future, Dion says: "I thank Mr. Anthony for this splendid opportunity to create myself--in my mother's image, so she may feel her life comfortably concluded."⁹⁵

Love can refuel his creative energy, but it will not. . . . The disparity between ideal womanhood and its faulty, cornified model is too great for him. His real self is masked from Margaret, just as it is from the rest of the world. There was a mother who could have inspired him with the strength to accept life as it is, but she would not. He took her fear-ridden rejection of him for malignity, and nurtured the hurt of it.⁹⁶

Dion, at the funeral of his father, recognizes he knew him only at the moment of his conception. His mother he remembers much more vividly:

And my mother? I remember a sweet, strange girl, with affectionate, bewildered eyes as if God had locked her in a dark closet without any explanation. I was the sole doll our ogre, her husband, allowed her and she played mother and child with me for many years in that house until at last through two tears I watched her die with the shy pride of one who has lengthened her dress and put up her hair. And I felt like a forsaken toy and cried to be buried with her, because our hands alone had caressed without clawing. She lived long and aged greatly in the two days before they closed her coffin. The last time I looked, her purity had forgotten me, she was stainless and imperishable, and I knew my sobs were ugly and meaningless to her virginity; so I shrank away, back into life, with naked nerves

⁹⁵ Prologue, Plays, III, 261.

⁹⁶ Robert C. Lee, "Lonely Dream," Modern Drama, IX (September 1966), 134f.

jumping like fleas, and in due course of nature another girl called me her boy in the moon and married me and became three mothers in one person, while I got paint on my paws in an endeavor to see God!"⁹⁷

That other woman, Dion's wife Margaret was, according to O'Neill, a direct descendant of Faust's Marguerite.⁹⁸ She is "an American female who discovers that there is no Cinderella and turns into Mother Goose. She loves love, loves a mask, but does not love Dion."⁹⁹ For Dion appears to Margaret only in his mask, and it is that mask of the god Pan that she really loves. She is "the eternal girl-woman with a virtuous simplicity of instinct, properly oblivious to everything but the means to her of maintaining the race."¹⁰⁰

Margaret also stands in relation to Dion as a mother. . . . The three mothers, presumably, mean the reincarnation of his dead mother, the wife-mother of Dion's sons, and insofar as Margaret recalls Faust's Marguerite, the Virgin mother, to whom saints pray.¹⁰¹

Margaret treats Dion as her little boy from the very start of their relationship. Before they are married, she says, "Dion is my Daddy-O! . . . And I'll be Mrs. Dion--Dion's wife--and he'll be my Dion--my own Dion--my baby!"¹⁰² She calls him, after the birth of their sons,

⁹⁷Act I, Scene 3, Plays, III, 282.

⁹⁸Toby Cole (ed.) Playwrights on Playwriting (New York: Hill and Wang, 1960), p. 238.

⁹⁹Deena P. Metzger, "Variations on a Theme: A Study of Exiles by James Joyce and The Great God Brown by Eugene O'Neill," Modern Drama, VIII (September 1965), 178.

¹⁰⁰Doris V. Falk, Eugene O'Neill and the Tragic Tension (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1958), p. 100.

¹⁰¹Bogard, Contour in Time, p. 274.

¹⁰²Prologue, Plays, III, 264.

"my oldest," and "My poor boy!" "As husband he is ceaselessly ironic especially about himself, but Margaret continues to be devoted in the maternal way that O'Neill emphatically imputes to both her and Cybel."¹⁰³ Dion, on his part, loves her, but he claims he doesn't know her. Before they are married, he actually believes that their love will enable him to have the mother he needs.

O God in the moon, did you hear? She loves me! I am not afraid! I am strong! I can love! She protects me! Her arms are softly around me! She is warmly around me! She is my skin! She is my armor! Now I am born--I--the I!--one and indivisible--I who love Margaret! (He glances at his mask triumphantly--in tones of deliverance) You are outgrown! I am beyond you! . . . O God, now I believe.¹⁰⁴

But at the end, she is still there only to cradle her boy, as she says to Dion's mask (the only Dion she had ever known): "You will sleep under my heart [in my womb!]. I will feel you stirring in your sleep, forever under my heart!"¹⁰⁵ Yet, as with others of the playwright's heroes--like Yank the hairy ape and Jamie the misbegotten--Dion Anthony is not there to hear the benediction pronounced upon him. The forgiveness he sought from the mother never was his.

It is in Mourning Becomes Electra (1929-31) that this close connection between the expression of the need for forgiveness and the person of the mother as the source of that forgiveness can be seen. Orin pleads for forgiveness from his dead mother, and vows that when they meet again, he will kneel before her and beg her forgiveness.

¹⁰³Lawson, p. 86.

¹⁰⁴Prologue, Plays, III, 266.

¹⁰⁵Act III, Scene 2, Plays, III, 323.

In his personal life, the playwright did not seek out that one place where, in the tradition of his own heritage, he might have found forgiveness. He could not. The church was no longer a possibility for him, and it was because of woman that he could find no forgiveness there. His marriages had created a formal block to his return--if not on the part of the church, then surely on the part of O'Neill himself. He could not have brought himself to admit that any one of his marriages had been wrong from a spiritual sense. But, above all, his mother stood in the way of his return to the church and the acceptance of forgiveness. She remained, doubtlessly all his life, the symbol of the Mother-God, the reminder of the Virgin Mary, and for what she had done to him, he could neither forgive nor be forgiven.

Indeed, such forgiveness of the Mother of God would be difficult to accept. She is capable of forgiveness; it is man who cannot accept. Sara says to her mother in A Touch of the Poet (1940),

Sure, I've always known you're the sweetest woman in the world, Mother, but I never suspected you were a wise woman, too, until I knew tonight the truth of what you said this morning, that a woman can forgive whatever the man she loves could do and still love him.¹⁰⁶

Such forgiveness, the heroes of O'Neill declare, is too hard to take. The strain of misogyny is really a love-hate relationship: the need for forgiveness as over against the contempt toward the one who forgives. To be forgiven is to accept dependence. It is in this way that weak characters exercise power through their weakness, as Robert in Beyond the Horizon (1917-18), Sam Evans in Strange Interlude (1926-27), Orin

¹⁰⁶Eugene O'Neill, A Touch of the Poet (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), Act IV, p. 149.

in Mourning Becomes Electra (1929-31), Dion Anthony in The Great God Brown (1925) and Don Parritt in The Iceman Cometh (1939).¹⁰⁷

The strong resent the offer; they resist the attraction of forgiveness. Dorothy Day, who knew O'Neill in his Village days and later herself became a Catholic, once remarked that she believed O'Neill "suffered from rejection of the love of God."¹⁰⁸ O'Neill was an "emotional hemophiliac; his wounds, his grievances, would never heal."¹⁰⁹ The violence that is often a part of the ambivalence in the plays is far more than just violence for its own sake: it was the struggle that arose because the love of love-hate symbolized a forgiveness that was too difficult to accept. The rejection of the Mother of God, and of mothers and wives as mothers, together with the escape to the prostitute/Earth Mother, is the rejection of proffered forgiveness.

There developed in the disillusioned son a sense of matricide. Where he had, personally, learned to handle his feelings toward his father earlier in life, through contempt, and later through dramatic successes, no such means of dealing with his feelings about the mother seemed possible. Of the women in the plays Desire Under the Elms (1924) and The Great God Brown (1925), Sheaffer writes:

Still, behind these loving sketches is the sinister fact that the two women are part of a legion of dead wives and mothers in O'Neill's writings, a clan larger than one may realize, since many of its ghostly members died before the plays begin and are referred to only fleetingly. Most likely O'Neill was unaware of the grim pattern

¹⁰⁷Clifford Leech, Eugene O'Neill (New York: Grove Press, 1963), pp. 22f.

¹⁰⁸Gelb, p. 361.

¹⁰⁹Sheaffer, Son and Playwright, p. 351.

that gradually developed in his words beneath other, more visible patterns, but this in no way alters the evidence that he had a strong matricidal impulse and through his plays took symbolic revenge again and again on Ella O'Neill, drug addict.¹¹⁰

A psychiatrist who knew O'Neill said that his antagonism toward his mother "was carried over to his relationships with women; because his mother had failed him, all women would fail him, and he had to take revenge on them. All women had to be punished."¹¹¹

From the failure to find and to receive the forgiveness from the mother arises then the rejection of the mother. In a strange scene in A Touch of the Poet (1940) the violence of this rejection is suggested. There is a strain of guilt that runs throughout the play and through the lives of all the characters. Con Melody is even "ashamed of being ashamed."¹¹² Nora desperately feels the need of doing penance:

Go to a doctor, you say, to cure the rheumatism. Sure, what's rheumatism but a pain in your body? I could bear ten of it. It's the pain of guilt in my soul. Can a doctor's medicine cure that? No, only a priest of Almighty God—. . . It would serve Con right if I took the chance now and broke my promise and woke up the priest to hear my confession and give me God's forgiveness that'd bring my soul to peace and comfort so I wouldn't feel the three of us were damned. . . . Oh, if I only had the courage!¹¹³

Nora takes courage, for an instant, rises and starts for the door to see the priest, but stops half-way to the door. While she lives with forgiveness for Con in his cruelty toward her, she lives without forgiveness for herself. As a strange act of atonement for all the ill in his

¹¹⁰ Sheaffer, Son and Artist, pp. 499f.

¹¹¹ Gelb, p. 595.

¹¹² O'Neill, A Touch of the Poet, Act I, p. 37.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, Act IV, p. 138.

life, Con on his part kills his prized mare. Sara pleads to know why he did such a thing.

Why did the Major, you mean! Be Christ, you're stupider than I thought, if you can't see that. Wasn't she the livin' reminder, so to spake, av all his lyin' boasts and dreams? He meant to kill her first wid one pistol, and then himself with the other. But faix, he saw the shot that killed her had finished him, too. There wasn't much pride left in the auld lunatic, anyway, and seeing her die made an end av him. So he didn't bother shooting himself, ¹¹⁴ because it'd be a mad thing to waste a good bullet on a corpse!

The horse is a mare, and in her is the image of the mother. Killing her meant his own suicide, and the Major was no more. But this act of killing the mare, the mother image, produced no guilt in this man who was earlier shamed by his own shame.

Blessed Christ, the look in her eyes by the lantern light with life ebbing out of them--wondering and sad, but still trustful, not reproaching me--with no fear in them--proud, understanding pride--loving me--she saw I was dying with her. She understood: She forgave me!¹¹⁵

Such a strange kind of forgiveness is not at all unlike the feeling Hickey in The Iceman Cometh (1939) has for the forgiving wife he has just killed. It is a rejection of the very offer of forgiveness, the murder of the one who offers it.

Violent rejection of the mother who does not forgive is to be seen also in any kind of violation of the mother. Few greater forms of blasphemy could be imagined in a faith such as Catholicism than the violation of the Mother of God. In most societies, few crimes would rank with an incestuous violation of the mother. Yet, such violation is suggested in several of the plays. In Desire Under the Elms (1924), Eben

¹¹⁴Ibid., Act IV, pp. 168f.

¹¹⁵Ibid., Act IV, p. 169.

seeks a kind of retribution for the wrongs done his dead mother by committing adultery with his stepmother in the very room where his mother had been laid out after her death, a room kept closed and sacred to her memory until his act of incest. In Mourning Becomes Electra (1929-31) Orin, reminded of his mother by the growing likeness between Lavinia and their dead mother, suggests, to Lavinia's horror, that they commit incest. It is surely his way of wishing union with his deceased mother through violation of her body in the person of his sister. When Jamie Tyrone, as he tells Josie in A Moon for the Misbegotten (1943), hired a whore to accompany him on the train trip from California to New York, it was his way of violating the memory of his mother, whose corpse rode the same train with them, the mother whose final look at him before her death had been one of recognition that he had returned to his alcoholic ways. It was a look, clearly, that made him aware of the failure of forgiveness.

Thus the world of O'Neill's plays is peopled with men who seek out a Mother of God for the satisfaction of their need for forgiveness. But always something--the failure of the mother, the lack of belief, the difficulty of acceptance--causes the rejection of the mother and any offer of forgiveness she might have. Instead, the men turn to the woman who might offer some consolation, a kind of forgiveness for being what they are: the prostitute.

Chapter 4

EARTH MOTHER

The rejection of the mother/Mother of God solved nothing for either the playwright or his characters. The quest was unrealized, the void unfilled. What could be done was to turn elsewhere for some consolation for the mother-love and forgiveness that had failed. Turning to the prostitute for such consolation after the rejection of the mother would underscore that rejection and prove the crudest rebuff possible. Jamie O'Neill had once done such a trick, no doubt to hurt his mother as cruelly as he could. At St. John's College, where Jamie had intended to prepare for the legal profession, he once brought a prostitute to campus and tried to pass her off as his sister--to win a bet. He was expelled for it. Eugene also on one occasion showed his contempt for his parents when he sported a prostitute at one of his father's performances.

Many of the characters of the plays also turn significantly to prostitutes as a symbol of the rejection of the mother, or the wife-as-mother: Jamie in Long Day's Journey (1940-41), Dion Anthony in The Great God Brown (1925), and Hickey in The Iceman Cometh (1939), in his usual binges while running from his ever-forgiving wife.

Perhaps it was quite natural for O'Neill to write about these women in his plays: they were not strange, exotic unknowns to the dramatist. As with all of the works, a part of the source for his ideas and characters can be found in personal experiences. Jamie had introduced Eugene to prostitutes at an early period in the younger brother's life.

With few exceptions, notably his own mother, Jamie looked on women as mere sexual objects.

He used women as he used drink, for release of tension, and always he used them. His love belonged to one woman, his mother; with the others he took perpetual revenge on her for being his father's wife. He went the round of easy chorus girls and prostitutes, preferring what his brother Eugene would call "bedlock" to wedlock. He knew all the ways of access to compliant women, and he would leave the New London boys gaping with tales of hotels in New York where widows were on the lookout for young men. Jamie knew all the ways and delighted in a "hard-boiled" display of what he knew.¹

Jamie shared attitudes and practices with his brother. He placed Eugene, still a young boy, "in the hands of hardened prostitutes who taught him quickly--without any glossing of romance or beauty or affection--the crude mechanics of sex."² Eugene would for the rest of his life be unable to separate sex from those earliest experiences, seeing them "as a deliberate revolt against love, as a kind of nasty rape."³ Yet, no matter how much it might have bothered him, O'Neill continued to follow in Jamie's paths, and learned soon enough to boast of his sexual exploits as he had so long heard his brother do.

O'Neill retained a life-long fascination for whores, as his plays and attitudes both attest. During World War II, he suggested that what the government should do for the soldiers was to open brothels for them, "at five cents a lay."⁴ He once complained that his wives had cost

¹Doris Alexander, The Tempering of Eugene O'Neill (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1967), p. 82.

²Ibid., p. 85.

³Ibid.

⁴Louis Sheaffer, O'Neill, Son and Artist (Boston: Little, Brown, 1973), p. 535.

him so much, and said that if he had "used all the money my wives cost me to open a string of whorehouses from New York to San Francisco, I would have a nice income today--and I'd have had a lot more fun."⁵

Consequently, it is not surprising that prostitutes are everywhere in O'Neill's plays. Other than in the mother, "femininity is found largely in whores."⁶ They play major roles in such works as "Anna Christie" (1919-20), The Great God Brown (1925), Welded (1922-23), Ah, Wilderness! (1932), The Moon of the Caribbees (1916-17) and The Iceman Cometh (1939). The prostitute is a common character in his works, paralleling the other common woman character, the mother.

For the more intelligent and complex males the prostitute means two complimentary but contrasting things: first, bawdy and therefore enjoyable conversation; and second, guilt-ridden sexual intercourse. It is in the late plays, as always, especially with Hickey of The Iceman Cometh and with Jamie Tyrone of Long Day's Journey and A Moon for the Misbegotten, that this paradox receives its fullest and darkest expression. Both Hickey and Jamie have come out of puritanical societies, Hickey from nineteenth-century fundamentalist, Middle-Western America, Jamie from early twentieth-century Irish Catholic New York and New England; in both cultures there was a firm distinction between "nice" girls, to whom certain words were not said, and "bad" girls, with whom anything went. . . . But all this Rabelaisian wordplay is finally only a veneer or surface behind which Hickey and Jamie suffer, for to them prostitutes are not only bought flesh but are also instruments by which these sinners torture themselves, piling guilt upon guilt. Both are trapped in the familiar O'Neill moral impasse described by Orin Mannon in Act III of The Haunted: "The only love I can know now is the love of guilt for guilt." For both men there is an undefiled woman in the background: for Hickey, his wife Evelyn; for Jamie, his mother, Mary. And it is because of their feelings of guilt toward these chaste women that the two men punish themselves with whores although they themselves

⁵Ibid., p. 653.

⁶Eric Bentley in Perry Miller (ed.) Major Writers of America II (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1962), p. 559.

are not always conscious of this paradox.⁷

These characters in the plays run the gamut of all types of prostitutes.

O'Neill's prostitutes diverge into two polar types, or rather, constitute a spectrum, with the philosopher-whore, a romantic convention, at one end, and a fairly realistic representation of twentieth-century, American streetwalkers, at the other. The contrast can be seen at its most obvious between Cybel, the earth-mother-goddess of The Great God Brown, and the feather-brained young ladies of the evening of The Iceman Cometh.⁸

Along this spectrum is the simple, good-natured whore who is simply available for men's needs wherever and whenever these needs arise. The prostitute in Marco Millions (1923-24) is like that. Whenever she appears in the play, it is always the same person, whatever the setting of the scene: "I sell to all nations," she says.⁹ Min, the local village prostitute in Desire Under the Elms (1924), who has been visited by Cabot and his sons Simeon and Peter, and finally by Eben as well, is a simple prostitute whom Eben finds little more than "round an' wa'am." The streetwalkers of The Iceman Cometh (1939), Margie and Pearl, are described in the play as

. . . typical dollar street walkers, dressed in the usual tawdry get-up. . . . Both are plump and have a certain prettiness that shows even through their blobby make-up. Each retains a vestige of youthful freshness, although the game is beginning to get them and give them hard, worn expressions. Both are sentimental, feather-brained, giggly, lazy, good-natured and reasonably con-

⁷ John Henry Raleigh, The Plays of Eugene O'Neill (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1965), pp. 121f.

⁸ Ibid., p. 118.

⁹ Act I, Scene 3, Plays, II, 367.

tented with life.¹⁰

On the far end of the spectrum are the philosophical prostitutes. The one visited by Michael Cape in Welded (1922-23) is called simply "A Woman." Their relationship is almost totally a verbal one, with the woman giving Cape advice that finally sends him back to his home and his wife. But the prostitute of this sort becomes more than philosophical. She becomes a "sheltering earth mother,"¹¹ and as a "generic giver," she may provide release for the hero of the play, even as well as a wife might.¹² What the men who consort with these prostitutes wish is always something other than sexual release. The relation takes on a religious flavor, for these male characters "long for a love affair that can match the emotional ecstasy of religious devotion. A pure, permanent passion is their aim."¹³

While the prostitutes, drawn no doubt in part from the personal observation of real women by the playwright, are quite human, they are also more than human. "His prostitutes are divine."¹⁴

The nobility of the prostitute in Welded is such that the hero kneels before her and refuses to rise until she forgives him for having ventured to approach her. Then he kisses her on the fore-

¹⁰ Act I, Plays, III, 611.

¹¹ Elizabeth Shipley Sergeant, "O'Neill: The Man With a Mask," New Republic, L (March 16, 1927), 92.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Robert C. Lee, "Lonely Dream," Modern Drama, IX (September, 1966), 134.

¹⁴ Edwin A. Engel, The Haunted Heroes of Eugene O'Neill (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1953), p. 84.

head and calls her "Sister." The reader must not laugh--the playwright's intent was not satirical.¹⁵

Cape tells the woman that "To learn to love life--to accept it and be exalted--that's the one faith that's left to us! . . . Good-by. I've joined your church."¹⁶ But it is in The Great God Brown (1925) that the idea of the prostitute as goddess is most clearly portrayed. There Cybel is clearly to be understood as Cybele, goddess of nature and the Great Mother of the gods. Of her, O'Neill wrote: "Cybel is an incarnation of Cybele, the Earth Mother doomed to segregation as a pariah in a world of unnatural laws but patronized by her segregators who are thus themselves the first victims of their laws."¹⁷ Her roots as goddess extend back to the nature goddess of ancient Asia Minor.¹⁸ Although she is a fertility symbol, she has no offspring of her own: "What's the good of bearing children? What's the use of giving birth to death?" she asks.¹⁹ Her mask shows only her chosen profession, while "her own face reveals the spiritual dimension of the Earth Mother."²⁰ At the death of Brown, she is still the Earth Mother, and stands "like an idol of Earth."²¹ But

¹⁵H. G. Kemelman, "Eugene O'Neill and the Highbrow Melodrama," Bookman, LXXV (September 1932), 486.

¹⁶Act II, Scene 2, Plays, II, 478.

¹⁷Toby Cole (ed.) Playwrights on Playwriting (New York: Hill and Wang, 1960), p. 238.

¹⁸Mardi Valgema, "O'Neill and German Expressionism," Modern Drama, XX (Spring 1967), 122.

¹⁹Act II, Scene I, Plays, III, 288.

²⁰Eugene M. Waith, "Eugene O'Neill: An Exercise in Unmasking," in John Gassner (ed.) O'Neill (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1964) p. 32.

²¹Act IV, Scene 2, Plays, III, 323.

she is worshipped as a creative force, not loved as a prostitute.

Both Cybel and Margaret represent an aspect of the life force. Cybel, as the personification of the earth goddess, is the force of nature itself. Dion calls her "Mother Earth," and she is related to the image of seasonal change, particularly to spring and to autumn harvest. Dion loves her because she brings him a sense of quiet and calm that is almost prenatal. In Cybel's room, he speaks of the sweetness and purity of his mother and his father whom he felt he knew only at the moment of his conception. Cybel becomes a mother, to whom he can turn as a child. Yet, if Cybel is life, it is difficult to see that Dion has been "life's lover." His worship of her power is not that of a lover.²²

Cybel serves many offices. She is a mystic²³ who offers such wisdom to her men as "Life's all right, if you let it alone,"²⁴ and "There is only love."²⁵ Although her counsel does not really succeed in the case of Dion, Cybel is the creative counselor.²⁶ And while she may be doomed to segregation in society, according to O'Neill, she is remarkably free, for she is "universal acceptance of all things."²⁷

It is only in her presence that Dion can truly be himself, can go without his mask. He calls her "Sister," but once they have agreed that their love will be non-sexual, she also can remove her mask and become "entirely the peace and beauty of the mother, and 'Mother!' is what Dion, without his mask, can call her."²⁸ In her Dion sees life

²²Travis Bogard, Contour in Time (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), p. 274.

²³Henry F. Pommer, "Mysticism of Eugene O'Neill," Modern Drama, IX (May 1966), 33.

²⁴Act I, Scene 3, Plays, III, 280.

²⁵Act III, Scene 2, Plays, III, 322.

²⁶Bogard, p. 269.

²⁷Frank P. Cunningham, "The Great God Brown and O'Neill's Romantic Vision," Ball State University Forum, XIV (Summer 1973), 75.

²⁸Alexander, p. 87.

itself, and he jests with her at one point: "Now you're becoming maternal, Miss Earth. Is that the only answer, to pin my soul into every vacant diaper?"²⁹ As the play progresses, Dion can be the little boy only with his head in Cybel's lap, "the archetypal image of the eternally protective mother to whom Dion longs to return."³⁰ His friendship with Cybel causes Dion's mask to take on "a diabolical Mephistophelean cruelty and irony."³¹

Another aspect of the Earth Mother is her priestly character. Cybel is a priestess to Dion and also to the Great God William Brown himself. In the end of the play, she pronounces her benediction:

Always spring comes again bearing life! Always again! Always, always forever again!--Spring again!--life again! summer and fall and death and peace again!--(With agonized sorrow)--but always, always, love and conception and birth and pain again--spring bearing the intolerable chalice of life again!--(Then with agonized exultance)--bearing the glorious, blazing crown of life again! (She stands like an idol of Earth, her eyes staring out over the world.)³²

As O'Neill would say, this was "The Mother of all gods and heroes."

This was what O'Neill called the subconscious mind. In it he grounded the psychic fate of his trilogy and discovered its form. It is this which makes his "modern" drama seem older than those of classic Greece. It takes us back unimaginable ages to a time, if ever there was such, of truly unaccommodated man--man before he peopled the world with the Olympians and other sky-gods, and instead worshipped and placated his ever-

²⁹Act I, Scene 3, Plays, III, 279.

³⁰Doris V. Falk, Eugene O'Neill and the Tragic Tension (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1958), p. 101.

³¹Oscar Cargill, Intellectual America (New York: Cooper Square, 1968), p. 698.

³²Act IV, Scene 2, Plays, III, 322f.

present dead. When O'Neill recasts the ancient myth of Orestes and Electra and abolishes the Olympian gods and all supernatural fate, however, the subconscious becomes the mother of demons, the dead become the pursuing Furies, and man goes inward to a hell of his own deserving.³³

The playwright was aware of the idea of the Earth Mother as it appeared in myth, possibly even through Irish myth, which possesses such a figure.³⁴ O'Neill had an early acquaintance with the image from classical mythology, through Greek tragedy, as well. "Eugene O'Neill, more than any other American playwright of his time, had a feeling for myth and its enactment in ritual and drama."³⁵ Nor was he tied to a repetition of the ancient myths, for he had the ability in himself to understand mythic qualities in human experiences.

Many playwrights have since attempted in various ways to employ myth; few have been successful in creating myth. . . . [Eugene O'Neill] returned to the content and form of classic myths, attempting to re-endow them with meaning and substance for modern man.³⁶

There exists in many of the plays a struggle between Virgin Mother and Earth Mother. Desire Under the Elms (1924) is largely about a struggle between the memory of a sainted mother and the temptation of an earthy stepmother for the power over the son, Eben. In The Great God Brown (1925), within the life of Dion Anthony dwells the feeling that the two women, his wife Margaret and the prostitute Cybel, are waging war

³³Hugh Dickinson, Myth on the Modern Stage (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1969), p. 182.

³⁴Alwyn and Brinley Rees, Celtic Heritage (London: Thames and Hudson, 1961), pp. 295f.

³⁵Winifred L. Frazer, "Chris and Poseidon: Man Versus God in Anna Christie," Modern Drama, XII (December 1969), 279.

³⁶Orley I. Holton, Mythic Patterns in Ibsen's Last Plays (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1970), p. 182.

against each other, with Dion as the spoils. But it is especially in More Stately Mansions (1938) that this struggle is depicted with such savagery. Deborah, Simon Harford's mother, is a reflection of the Mother of God, as the language of the greetings in the final act would suggest. There she is hailed by Sara in language reminiscent of the Ave Maria. The daughter-in-law, who has become more mistress than wife to Simon, granting him sexual favors in exchange for ever greater control of the family business, is the prostitute figure.³⁷ Even her means of getting Simon to marry her, as shown in A Touch of the Poet (1940), by becoming pregnant, shows her scheming ways. Marriage, in Simon's view, becomes a trap, and he warns his brother Joel of it.

If you ever fall in love, Joel, take my advice and do not marry. Keep your love your mistress with no right of ownership except what she earns day by day, what she can make you pay for possession. Love should be a deal forever incomplete, never finally settled, with each party continually raising the bids, but neither one concluding a final role. . . . Yes, my advice to you would be to shun marriage and keep a whore instead.³⁸

It is that struggle going on between mother and wife, Mother of God and Earth Mother, that creates such disgust for marriage in Simon's mind.

As these characters in More Stately Mansions show, there is no sharp distinction between the two figures, but instead a confusion of the images, a blurring of the sharp distinctions one would expect to find. Even as O'Neill could speak of women in his life as mistress, wife, mother, friend, so in the plays there is this blurring of images. Nina

³⁷The play abounds with the imagery of prostitution. See Jere Real, "The Brothel in O'Neill's Mansions," Modern Drama, XII (February 1970), 383-389.

³⁸Eugene O'Neill, More Stately Mansions (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1964), Act II, Scene 1, p. 72.

claims in Strange Interlude (1926-27) that she is pregnant with three men, husband, lover, father--four, in fact, counting her unborn son. In Days Without End (1931-34) Elsa speaks of the growth of her love for her husband, since "he's become my child and father now, as well as being my husband."³⁹ But the most striking of examples of the blurring of images is to be found in A Moon for the Misbegotten (1943), where Josie acts the part of village playgirl and gentle virgin at the same time. Because O'Neill associated love first of all with a pure love for the mother, "his women often have to undergo a kind of spiritual identification with the mother before his heroes can accept their love."⁴⁰ Simon Harford speaks of this kind of confusion and merging of images with regards to his mother and wife:

You would be astounded at the way she has transformed herself. It is as though she had slowly taken possession of Sara in order to make of my wife a second self through which she could live again. Or, in another aspect, trick Sara into being an accessory in the murder of that old self, which was once my mother. And so leave me motherless. But at the same time by becoming Sara, leave me wifeless. . . .⁴¹

It is such that Simon has begun to find it quite impossible to make any distinctions between wife and mother.

Sometimes the two have appeared to lose their separate identities in my mind's eye--have seemed, through the subtle power of Mother's fantastic will, to merge and become one woman--a spirit of Woman made flesh and flesh of her made spirit, mother and wife in one--to whom I was never anything more than a necessary adjunct of a means to motherhood--a son in one case, a husband in the other--but now no longer needed since the mother by becoming the wife has my four sons to substitute for me, and the wife having them, no

³⁹Act II, Plays, III, 518.

⁴⁰Alexander, p. 86.

⁴¹O'Neill, More Stately Mansions, Act II, Scene 1, p. 73.

longer needs a husband to use in begetting--And so I am left alone, an unwanted son, a discarded lover, an outcast without meaning or function in my own home but pleasantly tolerated in memory of old service and as a domestic slave whose greed can be used to bring in money to support Woman!⁴²

The two women complement each other, since each has something the other lacks and needs. Simon "eventually feels that he must get rid of one or the other in order to preserve his own emotional stability."⁴³

It is this opposition and merging of the women that creates the tautology in the dramas. The distinctions are never sharp ones; he does not, for example, polarize his characters into good and evil.⁴⁴ The use of parallel characters is quite common in O'Neill. The very structure of the plays, in fact, possesses an "impulse toward contrast."

This vision of human existence as alternating between opposites and yet being circularly repetitive, abstract as it is, is about as close as, in his plays anyway, O'Neill came to seeing a consistent meaning and design in the universe. "Rhythm" was his name for these basic dialectical and repetitive movements and, side by side with the speculations of God and existential loneliness in the plays of his first career, there was also developing a kind of poetic mythology concerning the "religion of rhythm," particularly in Welded, Lazarus Laughed, Strange Interlude, and especially in Dynamo, in which the dance of the polarities, in its manifestation in the physical phenomenon of electricity, is made explicitly into a religion.⁴⁵

But perhaps this sense of rhythm is more personal than metaphysical; perhaps it is the ambivalence in his characters that is source for this rhythm. A prime example is Long Day's Journey (1940-41), where

⁴²Ibid.

⁴³Edward Mullaly, "O'Neill and the Perfect Pattern," Dalhousie Review, LII (1972-3), 605.

⁴⁴Chester Clayton Long, The Role of Nemesis in the Structure of Selected Plays by Eugene O'Neill (The Hague: Mouton, 1968), p. 31.

⁴⁵Raleigh, p. 11.

the family members are alternately striking and hugging, tongue-lashing and praising, cursing and blessing one another. As with Strindberg, O'Neill might also say of the emotions of his characters: "It is called love-hate, and it hails from the pit!"⁴⁶

. . . . O'Neill introduced the figure of the woman as both destroyer and preserver. Early in his career, while he was still strongly imitative of Strindberg, O'Neill tended to portray woman as by nature incapable of understanding, and therefore, as inevitably draining the creative life of the poet. Ruth Mayo, Robert's wife, might well be the female in a rural Dance of Death. Later, however, O'Neill combines the woman's predatory nature with another quality that makes her supremely desirable: she becomes the object, in part, of the poet's quest. She is not only the destroying wife, but also the mother, in whose love the poet seeks to find forgetfulness, and the sense of home and unity with nature.⁴⁷

Since the prostitutes may serve as priestesses, as Cybel does, they possess the capacity to offer a divine blessing, a blessing that failed to provide forgiveness in the case of the mother/Mother of God. Cybel provides not only refuge for both Dion Anthony and William Brown, but the peace of a forgiving spirit. She understands their guilt and comforts them, and finally pronounces the benediction--in each case when death has made it too late. Josie Hogan, the playgirl-virgin, also provides a blessing for Jamie Tyrone, a benediction that only an Earth Mother/priestess could provide. She offers the word of forgiveness so needed by Jamie, but, as is so common in O'Neill's treatment of forgiveness, it is all too late, to no avail. He is too drunk, too sleepy to realize her announcement of forgiveness; he is beyond hearing distance

⁴⁶ Arthur and Barbara Gelb, O'Neill (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), p. 234.

⁴⁷ Travis Bogard in Eugene O'Neill, The Later Plays of Eugene O'Neill (New York: Modern Library, 1967), p. xv.

to receive the benediction offered at the end.

Whatever consolation might be provided O'Neill's heroes by the prostitutes they turn to, it does not suffice. There is no more forgiveness from them than there was to be had before the mother, or the Mother of God. They go their haunted ways disconsolate.

Chapter 5

FAILURE OF FORGIVENESS: THE MISBEGOTTEN

What the O'Neill hero can neither reject nor disregard is the desperation that possesses him in his need to be forgiven. Turning to the prostitute, the Earth Mother, provides no more possibility of receiving forgiveness than was offered by the mother or the Holy Mother, the Mother of God. There remains the desperate yearning to find acceptance and forgiveness, a yearning destined never to be fulfilled. What has been said of the nineteenth-century English novel might well be written of the great twentieth-century American playwright:

The nineteenth-century English novel, at least, constitutes an impressive record of Western man's compelling need to find, in society or in nature or, latterly, in himself, some source of grace equivalent to that offered in the Christian conception of forgiveness. In the course of this quest his self-awareness has expanded enormously, and along with it his conviction that his Maker, if there be a maker, has abandoned him to his own devices.¹

This desperate need for forgiveness arises, of course, from an overwhelming sense of guilt. O'Neill was far more than "aware of the nature of guilt"--² he was quite steeped in it. And the kinds of guilt in the plays run the gamut of human consciousness of wrongdoing. Guilt over greed wracks characters in Shell Shock (1918) and Gold (1920).

¹William A. Madden, "The Search for Forgiveness in Some Nineteenth-Century English Novels," in George A. Panichas (ed.) Mansions of the Spirit (New York: Hawthorne, 1967), p. 196.

²Winifred L. Frazer, E. G. and E. G. O.; Emma Goldman and The Iceman Cometh (Gainesville: University Presses of Florida, 1974), p. 61.

Feelings of guilt for sins of passion and excess plague the sailor-heroes in such early plays as Bound East for Cardiff (1914) and The Moon of the Caribbees (1916-17). Incestuous guilt is the strain of tragedy in Mourning Becomes Electra (1929-31), while guilt for any number of sins against the other members of the family in Long Day's Journey into Night (1940-41) keep each of the four haunted Tyrones morose for most of the course of the play. But it is the guilt of Hickey in The Iceman Cometh (1939) that portrays the O'Neill guilt in all its awesome tragedy: the guilt of one who will not accept the forgiveness of his sin, who, steeped in his guilt, destroys that very source of mercy that offers to wipe away the guilt. After all the love and pardon Evelyn his wife had granted him, Hickey could feel only resentment, for "There's a limit to the guilt you can feel and the forgiveness and the pity you can take."³ The pipe dream Evelyn had believed in all those years was that the forgiveness she proffered would be accepted, and Hickey would become the man she dreamed he might be. Strangely, though, Hickey's solution to the guilt that only grew with forgiveness was to destroy his pardoner, and only then could he feel "as though a ton of guilt was lifted off my mind."⁴ For there is a far greater guilt than that of commission or omission that is suffered by the O'Neill character. This guilt is primal: it is that guilt one bears forever for the unpardonable sin of being, the original sin of being born. Edmund, in Long Day's Journey into Night, admits how much better it would have been had fate chosen to deliver him to this world as a fish, not a

³Act IV, Plays, III, 715.

⁴Ibid., III, 716.

man. Underneath the whole drama runs this strain of Edmund as the mis-take. His birth was the cause of his mother's addiction, and to that personal plight of Mary Tyrone can be traced the ills that haunt the rest of the family. Much earlier (1921), O'Neill drew another character, less autobiographically, who admits in so many words the crime of his own birth:

YANK: Sure! Lock me up! Put me in a cage! Dat's de on'y answer yuh know. G'wan, lock me up!
 POLICEMAN: What you been doin'?
 YANK: Enuf to gimme life for! I was born, see? Sure, dat's de charge. Write it in de blotter. I was born, get me!⁵

Such is the primal guilt of the hero in O'Neill.

To fit this strain of such a deep sense of guilt O'Neill chose tragedy as his mode of expression. He who used to cry "Life's a tragedy--Hurrah!" once quoted the art critic, Eli Faure: "We must take everything tragically, nothing seriously."⁶ There is thus a "core of authentic tragic intensity and cosmic seriousness in all his drama."⁷ Only the tragic--and O'Neill understood it in the classic, Greek sense--could have significance for O'Neill. In this, he flew in the face of trends in American drama. It was commonly said that tragedy "was not native to the American soil and had no place in the American drama."⁸

⁵The Hairy Ape, Scene 7, Plays, III, 250f.

⁶Arthur and Barbara Gelb, O'Neill (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), p. 348.

⁷Walter Stein, "Drama," in his The Twentieth Century Mind (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), II, 445.

⁸Gelb, p. 486.

This, O'Neill felt, was "the most damning commentary on our spiritual barrenness. . . . Tragedy not native to our soil? Why, we are tragedy--the most appalling yet written or unwritten."⁹ While modern drama preferred the "unhappy ending" to tragedy in the classical sense, perhaps the real difference might be, as Joseph Wood Krutch points out, that classical tragedy dealt with something that came to an end, while modern tragedy deals with something that goes on.¹⁰

Tragedy is the tale of the guilty, and only rarely could O'Neill write other than unrelenting tragedy. One very inappropriate method of relief from this otherwise constant tragic sense is in the theme of laughter. It is as if somehow laughter, by way of a failure or refusal to take seriously the tragedy of life, could deny that tragedy. But it never succeeds. It is in the face of death that O'Neill's characters are most apt to indulge in laughter. In The Great God Brown (1925) it is with laughter that both personalities of the hero's split personality greet death. As Dion is dying, he says of death and laughter: "Nothing more--but Man's last gesture--by which he conquers--to laugh! Ha--"¹¹ Brown, too, knows of that laughter in the face of death:

I know! I have found him. I hear him speak! "Blessed are they that weep, for they shall laugh!" Only he that has wept can laugh! The laughter of Heaven sows earth with a rain of tears, and out of Earth's transfigured birth-pain the laughter of Man

⁹Ibid., pp. 486f.

¹⁰Joseph Wood Krutch, The American Drama since 1918 (New York: Braziller, 1957), p. 75.

¹¹Act II, Scene 3, Plays, III, 299.

returns to bless and play again in innumerable dancing gales of flame upon the knees of God! (He dies).¹²

It is in Lazarus Laughed (1925-26) that O'Neill developed further this theme of laughter in the face of tragedy. As a reflection of the Biblical passage¹³ in which it is said "Jesus wept," Lazarus learns to laugh in the face of death: it is the symbol of the resignation that conquers death. Laughter was something quite foreign to the experience of Lazarus before the miracle of his resurrection. When he died--before the miracle--he had been victim to this sickness of a last, desperate resignation to death. He longed for death, for it would mean peace for him. As it was told later by a friend of his, at that time Lazarus had smiled: "It was the first time I had seen him smile in years."¹⁴ At the raising of Lazarus, Jesus, who had wept at Lazarus' death, "smiled sadly but with tenderness,"¹⁵ and it was then that Lazarus began to laugh, softly. Slowly, Lazarus learned the truth, until he could say, "But there is no death nor fear, nor loneliness! There is only God's Eternal laughter! His laughter flows into the lonely heart!"¹⁶ The laughter in Lazarus Laughed rings ever more and more shallow, and behind it there would seem to echo the sound of the playwright. It seems to be a laughter in spite of, and not because of any relation to something outside the self. There seems to be no forgiveness--it is not the laughter of the pardoned.

¹²Act IV, Scene 2, Plays, III, 322.

¹³John 11:35.

¹⁴Lazarus Laughed, Act I, Scene 1, Plays, I, 276.

¹⁵Ibid., I, 277.

¹⁶Act III, Scene 2, Plays, I, 349.

It is instead a mockery, as when Lazarus says to the lion who has been crucified by Caesar because of Lazarus: "Forgive me your suffering!"¹⁷ The message of Lazarus remains a rather empty echo: "There is no death! There is no death!"

Boiled down to its essence, Lazarus, though filled with the exultant laughter of its hero, is a grim attempt on O'Neill's part to deny the finality of death. It conveys the impression that, however impassioned O'Neill was trying to evoke a sense of joyousness in life and fearlessness of death, he did not convince himself.¹⁸

While O'Neill, almost entirely alone in the opinion, thought it his best play, Lazarus Laughed was more like "the homeless renegade Catholic . . . trying to exorcise his own darkness and fears."¹⁹ The theme of laughter only underlines the seriousness of the guilt, and the desperate demand for the forgiveness.

As laughter fails, so does the possibility of the happy ending. Only once did O'Neill write a comedy: Ah, Wilderness! (1932). It would appear that this delightful story of a happy family is the reverse of the coin which was later to appear as the story of an unhappy family in Long Day's Journey (1940-41). It is a play with a happy ending, of course, and only in one other play did O'Neill opt for the happy ending, an ending that is far from convincing. "Anna Christie" (1919-20) is the story of a prostitute who hopes to leave her old ways by returning to her seafaring father. She lives with him on the coal barge in which he plies

¹⁷Act III, Scene 1, Plays, I, 329.

¹⁸Gelb, p. 600.

¹⁹Louis Sheaffer, O'Neill, Son and Artist (Boston: Little, Brown, 1973), pp. 200f,

the New England coast. When castaways from a shipwreck are brought aboard, Anna falls in love with one of the sailors, and Mat Burke falls in love with her. Both Mat and her father Chris become possessive of Anna, and when they fight over her, Anna informs them of the ugly past she has lived, and the two men leave the ship in disgust. When, two days later, the men both return, it is learned that by a quirk of fate both have signed on the same ship. Chris has signed over all his earnings to provide for Anna's care, and Mat agrees to forgive Anna her past, and to marry her. There is thus a kind of gratuitous forgiveness by an almost uncomprehending Mat, and while Chris wonders what tricks the sea might still pull on the young lovers, Anna and Mat face their future confidently and happily.²⁰ There is no real resolution of the anxiety that exists between Mat and Anna, only a happy ending that is less than convincing, an ending O'Neill himself found necessary to defend. The happy ending succeeded no better for O'Neill than did the noise of laughter: the guilt remained, ever demanding resolution that was to be found nowhere.

Neither could the author in some way do away with forgiveness as the object of pursuit. It remained the aim of his characters. In keeping with the faith in which he had been raised, forgiveness was for O'Neill the restoration of a relationship between the sinner and his God, mediated by a third party. In Catholicism, that position is held by the son of God as Mediator, but it is through the Virgin Mother as Mediatrix that the believer approaches the Son. Central to this process is the

²⁰That perennial play of the happy ending on the American stage, the musical, has found material for two shows in two of O'Neill's plays, Ah, Wilderness! (Take Me Along) and "Anna Christie" (New Girl in Town).

act of confession. While the nature of confession has undergone changes in recent years, the following description could well be applied to the young and impressionable Eugene O'Neill:

Anyone who grew up a Roman Catholic can remember the opening formula: "Bless me, Father, for I have sinned." Many also remember anxious days as seven-year-olds, learning what to say after those words, when they would kneel in the blackness of a narrow cubicle and talk to a shadowy figure behind a grille. "I disobeyed my parents"; "I told a lie"; "I said a bad word." The ritual was required. Without it one would not be permitted to reach the bright day of his first Holy Communion. Later, if one went on in parochial school, it became a schoolday habit: the herd march into the pews for an afternoon of fidgeting or perhaps nervously inventing sins, waiting for one's turn in the dark confessional and the familiar--if not quite inevitable--"three Our Fathers; three Hail Marys."²¹

The ingrained memory of those early experiences with the confessional find expression in the plays of O'Neill. Specifically, two of the plays, The Iceman Cometh (1939) and Long Day's Journey (1940-41) employ scenes that suggest the confessional--a form in keeping with O'Neill's life-long purpose of making the theatre a place of worship. In the former play, the two characters who seem to split between them the role of hero, Larry Slade and "Hickey" Hickman, both engage in confessing the wrongs that have created their guilt. In a speech that runs about three-quarters of an hour, Hickey confesses his crime of the murder of his wife, and explains in great detail the reasons for his action. But it is not only Hickey's moment for truth-telling, for along with his admissions are heard the confessions of Larry Slade, formulated less by the taciturn Larry himself than through the words of Don Parritt, in a

²¹ "When to Confess," Time, CII (September 3, 1973), 69.

kind of "antiphonal speech."²² These "confessions that never expiate the crime"²³ are expressed compulsively. Hickey begins, "I've got to tell you."²⁴ "Realistically, this long confession is a masterpiece of abnormal psychology."²⁵ It must root out all the reasons behind the action Hickey confesses last, the murder of his wife, and so Hickey must begin at the beginning: "You see, even as a kid--"²⁶ Larry's confession, which parallels that of Hickey, is made by Parritt, the young son of his former lover, who "parrots" the feelings and especially the disillusionment Larry feels for Parritt's mother, Rosa, and for the anarchist movement for which she stands.

Both the confessions center around women. While waiting for Hickey to come--in the scene where he will make his confession--Willie Oban, one of the bar's inhabitants, sings a song to pass the time and thereby sets the stage for the confession. He wishes that "Hickey or Death would come!" and then sings his "fine Old New England folk ballad" about a sailor and a woman. It was written, Oban claims, not by Ralph Waldo Emerson as legend would have it, but--in his opinion--by none other than Jonathan Edwards. The song tells of the seduction of the sailor by a

²²Robert Brustein, The Theater of Revolt (Boston: Little, Brown, 1964), p. 346.

²³Walter Kerr, "Long Day's Journey Into Night," New York Herald Tribune, reprinted in Jordon Yale Miller (ed.) Playwright's Progress: O'Neill and the Critics (Chicago: Scott, Foresman, 1965), p. 136.

²⁴The Iceman Cometh, Act IV, Plays, III.

²⁵Frederic I. Carpenter, Eugene O'Neill (New York: Twayne, 1964), p. 156.

²⁶Act IV, Plays, III, 709.

harlot, and when it begins to get lewd Rocky the bartender quiets Oban. When Hickey does arrive, the confession he offers centers--as does the Slade-Parritt confession--around women, women whose role it is to create in a man's life the awful feelings of guilt. "She enters a man's life calling upon him to become more than he is, but by doing so, she makes him feel guilty because he cannot."²⁷

The other play, Long Day's Journey, is also constructed in this same vein. The structure of the play is built about the idea of the confessional. "For all his early apostasy, the author could not root out the effect of his Catholic upbringing; the Tyrone's living room gradually takes on the character of a confessional."²⁸ He had often "stepped into the confessional booth" to write his plays--as in The Iceman Cometh, certainly--but never with such earnestness and boldness as here. Ritual in O'Neill was always a reflection of the Catholic upbringing of the child, but nowhere did that training show itself with such force as when it reflected that isolated quarter where the human soul is supposed to be laid bare, before God--and before a fellow man. Such guilt as is brought to the confessional is brought to this play.

The family's Catholicism is not so much a faith as a guilt. Because he feels guilt, O'Neill shifts between a self-pity which he despises and a burning blame which he keeps trying in this play (and his whole work) to fight off. The accusation of his own guilt and obsessive desire to purge himself of it through blame nags at him: hence the repetitiousness of phrases and scenes; it is a planned repetitiousness, often wearisome.²⁹

²⁷Ibid.

²⁸Sheaffer, Son and Artist, pp. 513f.

²⁹Harold Clurman, "The O'Neills," Nation CLXXXII (March 3, 1956), 183.

There exists in the play a forensic character to the confessions, one which is seen in other works, notably The Great God Brown (1925). Nowhere is there a willing confession on the part of any of the Tyrones: admissions are wrung out of each other only through the most agonizing of struggles. The constant expressions of ambivalence in the play, which can give the play in production an almost comic atmosphere if played carelessly, are not so much the juxtaposition of love and hate as that of denial-confession, projection of guilt and admission of wrong. While it may detract from the total effectiveness of the play, this "continuous interplay of wounding and healing, of rancor and affection reveals O'Neill's compassion and understanding of his mother and father and brother."³⁰

With the Tyrones constantly resifting the past, to use it as either an accusation against the others or a defense of themselves, the play becomes so many continuing individual histories, all of them intertwined, each affecting the rest. Also, as the family members seek at once exoneration and forgiveness--they are forever admitting and denying their offenses in almost the same breath--the play develops, in piecemeal fashion, into a series of confessions.³¹

Thus, reluctantly at first, but slowly and with an ever-greater openness, the four haunted Tyrones disclose their several guilts. The movement of the play is from accusation through contrition to confession and penance. When the play is over, all might say, with Jamie, "That's all. Feel better now. Gone to confession."³²

³⁰Thomas R. Dash, "Long Day's Journey into Night," Women's Wear Daily (November 8, 1956) as reprinted in Jordan Y. Miller, Playwright's Progress, p. 135.

³¹Sheaffer, Son and Artist, pp. 513f.

³²Eugene O'Neill, Long Day's Journey into Night (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1955), Act IV, p. 167.

In both these plays, there is the marked absence of what might be called "grace" in a theological sense.

Grace unites two elements: the overcoming of guilt and the overcoming of estrangement. The first element appears in theology as the "forgiveness of sins," or in more recent terminology, as "accepting acceptance though being unacceptable." The second element appears in theology as "regeneration" or in more recent terminology, as the "entering into the new being" which is above the split between what we are and what we ought to be. Every religion, even if seemingly moralistic, has a doctrine of salvation in which these two elements are present.³³

In each of the plays, the pronouncement of such grace, had it appeared effectively, would have been made by a woman. In The Iceman Cometh Evelyn does attempt such an offer of grace, many times, but her husband Hickey finds it impossible to accept. In Long Day's Journey, Mary, at the very moment Edmund pleads for her touch, a sign of her grace, scolds him for touching her. O'Neill does not have a "strategy of reconciliation."³⁴ His "tragedy cannot encompass the presence of grace, the divine act beyond human effort that promises an eternal moment of peace."³⁵ Because it is too painful to accept this mediated grace, Hickey must slay the offerer. Because the one who could grant such grace to Edmund lives in the past, is indeed no longer with him, the hoped-for grace eludes him. Grace, and the forgiveness it holds, is not possible. Neither Evelyn ("Eve, the mother of all living") nor Mary (the new "Eve," mother of all the faithful) can offer the hero a

³³Paul Tillich, Theology of Culture (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959), pp. 142f.

³⁴Nathan A. Scott, Jr., Rehearsals of Discomposure (New York: Columbia University Press, 1952), p. 3.

³⁵Lionel Basney, "Eugene O'Neill: Earthbound Aspiration," Christianity Today, XVIII (November 23, 1973), 22.

satisfactory forgiveness to do away with the guilt.

Punishment, though, also fails. O'Neill had a decided need to punish himself, as was recognized by many of his acquaintances, through the destructive drinking of his younger days.³⁶ "Follow the road he travels and you will often hear the sound of flagellation. Look and you will see that the cruel whip is brought down by a tormented soul on his own back."³⁷ But purgatory fails as surely as did penance. Purgatory is, of course, for those who die in a state of grace, not those who live in a state of sin. The playwright seems unwilling to see any other possibility than that his characters are guilty and that forgiveness is in no wise possible for them. They are to be counted among the damned. "Reading his life, one discovers that he thought of himself, in his romantic way, damned."³⁸ In this, he was very much like the heroes he chose for his own life. Such writers as Nietzsche, Strindberg and Baudelaire all bore the pose of the damned.³⁹ So, too, the characters in O'Neill who are stage reflections of the dramatist are among the damned.

There is left only yearning for death, a "drive toward death."⁴⁰

³⁶Sheaffer, Son and Artist, p. 162.

³⁷Elizabeth Shipley Sergeant, Fire Under the Andes (New York: Knopf, 1927), as quoted in Sheaffer, Son and Artist, p. 216.

³⁸Jack Richardson, "O'Neill Reconsidered," Commentary, LVII (January 1974), 56.

³⁹Baudelaire thought of himself as damned from birth. See Alex de Jong, Baudelaire: Prince of Clouds (New York: Paddington, 1977).

⁴⁰Thomas P. McDonnell, "O'Neill's Drama of the Psyche," Catholic World, CXC VII (May 1963), 124.

Much has been written about this "death wish" in O'Neill. He learned it in part from his reading, especially the fin de siècle poets and, of course, Nietzsche. O'Neill's personality fairly shouted it; as Dorothy Day said of him in his Greenwich Village days: "He was absorbed by death and darkness."⁴¹ In his psychoanalysis in the mid-1920's, the analyst noted this death wish.⁴² His plays fairly abound in deaths, mostly violent, and a popular pastime in O'Neill studies has always been to count the ways men die in his plays.⁴³ From the earliest plays, right through to the last of his writing days, he was almost enamored of death, now defying it with laughter, now courting it, but always writing in its pale shadow. In A Moon for the Misbegotten (1943), O'Neill expressed what he felt was a strong death wish in Jamie,⁴⁴ a wish that grew out of Jamie's need to be with his mother, always. But perhaps there was in that play more than a little longing on the part of the author himself, not to be left so very alone from among all the O'Neill's.

The result of this failure of forgiveness in the works of O'Neill--and in his life, it might be added--is not, however, a simple sense of doom or damnation, or even a mere death wish. In O'Neill, it was much more primal than that. While someone who lived with and wrote about so somber a sense of damnation might be expected to be suicidal,

⁴¹ Gelb, p. 362.

⁴² Ibid., p. 597.

⁴³ See, for example, Frederick Lumley, New Trends in Twentieth Century Drama (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), p. 115.

⁴⁴ Croswell Bowen, The Curse of the Misbegotten (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1959), p. 146.

with the lone exception of the author's attempted suicide at Jimmy the Priest's bar in New York in his mid-twenties, O'Neill seemed to reject suicide as any kind of solution. He wrote about it, as in the plays Exorcism (1919) (which he later destroyed) and Before Breakfast (1916), but never does he turn to the subject again as a practicable solution for the woes of his characters. As for a death wish, this, too, is not really what possesses O'Neill's thought. It was common enough for the age in which he wrote. He had nurtured his intellect on those authors who themselves exhibited the death wish. The times, too, encouraged such attitudes. "The death-wish in human life, so dramatically emergent in the First World War, could hardly be ignored by anyone writing in 1920."⁴⁵ It was in Nietzsche, however, that O'Neill found the concept that seemed to satisfy his own feelings, a concept the playwright termed "the misbegotten." Of Nietzsche it has been said:

He was deeply impressed by the Greek's concern for the consequences of man's overstepping the limits set to his life--the consequences of hybris--and by his sensitivity to the pain in life which often amounted to a cosmic sense of guilt at being alive at all.⁴⁶

As an expression of his nihilism, Nietzsche borrowed, from the fifth-century, B. C., Greek, Theognis of Megara, the idea that death is preferable to life, but not having been born at all is better still.

It is thus not really a death wish that haunts O'Neill. He does not say, "I wish I were dead." His plea is more primal: "I wish

⁴⁵ Northrop Frye, Spiritus Mundi (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976), p. 33.

⁴⁶ John E. Smith, "The Conquest of the Tragic through Art, in Nathan A. Scott, Jr. (ed.) The Tragic Vision and the Christian Faith (New York: Association Press, 1957), p. 215.

I had never been born." His characters, like Jamie Tyrone in A Moon for the Misbegotten, are not ill-begotten, nor mal-begotten, they are misbegotten: the mistake was that they were ever conceived at all. "Strip-ped of its 'Island' imagery [in Mourning Becomes Electra], the way back to the womb, to peace and security, is a return to prenatal unconsciousness."⁴⁷ This is the punishment for being born. While O'Neill had a fascination for the memorabilia of his own birth,⁴⁸ he never could forget, as the final plays attest, how really unwanted he was as a child--or at least was made to feel. Jamie had far more right to exist than Eugene, it could be supposed, and Eugene's birth seemed to be in spite of everything. After the death of Edmund, her second child, Ella O'Neill had a series of induced abortions.⁴⁹ When it was decided by James and Ella O'Neill that she should have a second child, they hoped for a girl. "Given his druthers, he probably would have preferred to stay in the womb."⁵⁰ All O'Neill's attitudes were colored by this sense of the misbegotten: attitudes toward family, his own children, and even the world, the destruction of which he seemed to desire. Like his "hopeless hope," he seemed haunted by a "death-less death."

It is in A Moon for the Misbegotten that O'Neill most vividly expresses this notion of the "misbegotten." It is the story of Jamie,

⁴⁷Thomas E. Porter, Myth and Modern American Drama (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1969), p. 45.

⁴⁸See Gelb, p. 58.

⁴⁹Sheaffer, Son and Artist, p. 510.

⁵⁰John Henry Raleigh, The Plays of Eugene O'Neill (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1965), p. 306.

the author's brother, and yet it is his own story. Jamie comes to the small New England farm which he owns as a result of the recent death of his mother. (Jamie's brother earns only a brief mention in the play, as one who would surely agree with Jamie's disposition of the property.) Josie Hogan, the daughter of the tenant, has a reputation for having slept with most of the men around when, in fact, she is still a virgin. When Jamie visits the farm, he manages to spend the night with her--on the steps of the simple farm house. Jamie drinks himself into a stupor, and Josie holds him in her arms through the long night, a picture of the Pieta. When her father finds the two in this pose, Josie speaks of the "great miracle": "A virgin who bears a dead child in the night, and the dawn finds her still a virgin. If that isn't a miracle, what is?"⁵¹

The Virgin has given birth to the Misbegotten.

The primal sense of "the misbegotten" was the sense of the failure of forgiveness. Turning to the Mother of God and to that figure which always represented the Virgin Mary for O'Neill, his own mother, he found that he could never forgive her, for had she not withheld forgiveness from him, for being born, and demonstrated it by her constant rejection of him? Turning to the Earth Mother, as did Jamie Tyrone in this swan song of the poet, yielded no greater sense of genuine forgiveness. He could no more find with whores as Earth Mothers the pardon and peace that he sought than he could with Mary his own mother, or Mary the Mother of Christ. There is only the feeling, until death should come and take that feeling away, that one might have been better off had he never been born, or begotten, at all.

⁵¹Eugene O'Neill, A Moon for the Misbegotten (New York: Vintage, 1973), Act IV, p. 103.

Chapter 6

THE PLAYWRIGHT'S WORLD

The artistic "world" created by Eugene O'Neill can be viewed best in his most powerful play, Long Day's Journey into Night (1940-41). This is not to suggest that the whole of the dramatist's work can be viewed here, for there is throughout O'Neill's works a dynamic quality, so that no static conception exists, even from one play to another.¹ Nor does this suggest that Long Day's Journey is the most typical of the plays, for there is actually no play that provides a "type" of O'Neill drama. It intends, instead, to suggest that this play is the most revelatory of the playwright's feelings, his beliefs, and his anxieties about what counted. It is here that he peopled his stage with the characters he knew by far the best, drawn from the close-knit circle of his immediate family, revealing their deepest feelings, too long repressed, about the world and each other. It is a world he knew so well, and so he could very well re-create it as a dramatic world offered for contemplation. The play follows a pattern he was to use over and over again: the movement from day to night. For, indeed, most of his plays were constructed somehow on the contrast, the polarity between day and night, and most were long day's journeys into night, purposeful journeys: they were descriptions of a quest. Furthermore, if there is anywhere in the plays an unmistakable thread of the theme of forgiveness, united with the idea of

¹John Henry Raleigh, The Plays of Eugene O'Neill (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1965), p. 5.

woman, it is here that it comes into focus, for the play is above all a play about forgiveness. So reads the author's inscription:

For Carlotta, on our 12th Wedding Anniversary

Dearest: I give you the original script of this play of old sorrow, written in tears and blood. A sadly inappropriate gift, it would seem, for a day celebrating happiness. But you will understand. I mean it as a tribute to your love and tenderness which gave me the faith in love that enabled me to face my dead at last and write this play--write it with deep pity and understanding and forgiveness for all the four haunted Tyrones.²

Carlotta confirmed that this was the essence of the play when she said:

"He had to write it because it was a thing that haunted him and he had to forgive his family and himself."³

The world presented in the play is a very human world. While in earlier plays there had been the various images of God--the electrical display, the sea, youth, wealth, even the God of the Catholic faith--in the last plays of the author these no longer exist as before; the "curtain drops on the cosmos, and human life is seen as self-contained."⁴ What exists beyond mankind is only a metaphysical chaos. It is a godless world, yet one in which his memory is always there as a ghostly presence. For some, as Mary Tyrone in her trance of the lost past, God is not so easily dismissed, and Tyrone in his stubborn way can't quite deny his past, either. For the others, Edmund and Jamie, the issue is settled, but they are still condemned to settle the issue repeatedly

²Eugene O'Neill, Long Day's Journey into Night (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1955), p. 7.

³Arthur and Barbara Gelb, O'Neill (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), p. 7.

⁴Raleigh, p. 5.

before the parents. Yet, the direction is man-ward, never god-ward, for they live in this very human world. The characters are not forced to fit a mold of the author's own making, however; they are free to be themselves, for there are no preconceptions as to what men should be. They exist in a terrifying, real world, as if the characters were living out the wisdom of the prostitute-Earth Mother figures in such plays as Welded (1923-24) and The Great God Brown (1925): they have learned, at least before the action of the play begins, to let life alone. Theirs is an existential attitude.

Yet, the world they inhabit is a spirit world, ruled by spiritual forces. Nature--the environment they move in and the heredity that is theirs--is not the fate they share. Above those forces of nature are the mysterious life forces that really rule. Or, perhaps, it were better to say that within them were these forces, no less mysterious, yet truly spiritual. But the world is one that is steeped in its own ills. If there were ever a state of innocence, it cannot be taken seriously; it is only a product of the desperate hopes of dreamers. As in all of the author's works, Eden and Paradise are distant islands which do not really exist. Even the one experience of freedom and innocence Edmund felt--as he lost himself, dissolved in the sea, become one with the moonlight--is only a memory of the past, and not reality at all.⁵ Innocence is no more, and never truly existed in the real experiences of the four Tyrones, and with the absence of innocence are lost also love, trust, goodness, kindness, peace--and the ignorance of sin. For this is the

⁵O'Neill, Long Day's Journey, Act IV, p. 153.

state that surrounds them in their human condition. However close they might appear to each other, their lives have been marked by the rupture of human relationships. However intimate, they display every evidence of their alienation from each other. This alienation is seen as sins, though, far more than Sin. What separates them are the many wrongs they've done each other. The sense of Sin as a human state is not there; there is only the stringing together of innumerable hurts that at last have set them at odds with one another and will not let them overcome these distances.

This is their guilt, and an overwhelming force it is. The theme was nothing new to the playwright, for in most of his plays guilt is the strongest of these spiritual forces.⁶ And the time toward which they move, the night, is the fitting habitat for guilt. Each of the Tyrones is steeped in guilt, and so reaches out for forgiveness in a final act of desperate hope. For Long Day's Journey is such a last grasp toward forgiveness, when in truth it is too late.

The forgiveness they seek, as Mary notes, could lead to a restoration of faith and of the divine relationship she once had in her days of innocence.

But some day, dear, I will find it again--some day when you're all well, and I see you healthy and happy and successful, and I don't have to feel guilty any more--some day when the Blessed Virgin Mary forgives me and gives me back the faith in Her love and pity I used to have in my convent days, and I can pray to her again--when She sees no one in the world can believe in me even for a moment any more, then She will believe in me, and with her help it will be so

⁶"Guiltily" and "in guilty confusion" are two very common stage directions intended to set not only the stage but the emotions of the characters as well.

easy. I will hear myself scream with agony, and at the same time I will laugh because I will be so sure of myself.⁷

It is not that same pardon from the Blessed Virgin Mary that the others appear to seek, however, for theirs is a human world and they seem to be looking for no more than a purely human pardon. Here, "confession, born of suffering, leads ultimately to mutual sympathy and understanding, and, in its moments of most devastating candor, to a partial justification of human worth."⁸ There are many things they do forgive each other. Mary pardons Tyrone for many of his faults, especially because he has not been guilty of the one she counts the gravest: unfaithfulness. Edmund listens, again, to that oft-repeated story of his father's childhood, but this time with compassion. Edmund forgives Jamie his drunken conduct. Generally, all share the feeling of Edmund about the family: "Christ, you have to make allowances in this damned family or go nuts!"⁹ This need for "allowances," for pardon, is vital to the human family, for "the universality of pain makes pity and understanding and forgiveness the greatest of human needs."¹⁰

And so, the four haunted Tyrones "go to confession."

Mary is the first to confess. Her need for confession is great. Her "illness," her addiction to morphine, to which she has just returned after her latest stay in a sanitarium, is central to the play. Even the

⁷O'Neill, Long Day's Journey, Act II, Scene 2, pp. 93f.

⁸Travis Bogard, Contour in Time (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), p. 21.

⁹O'Neill, Long Day's Journey, Act IV, p. 145.

¹⁰Bogard, p. 427.

illness of Edmund, diagnosed clearly as consumption that very day, is overshadowed by Mary's return to dope. To make matters worse, she is also back to her old habit of lying about it, trying vainly to hide from her family--and herself--the fact that she has started again that spiraling route to ever-greater dosages and the need for another period of isolation from her family to take the cure once again. She denies it is what it is, insisting the morphine serves only to relieve her of the pain, although she admits momentarily it is not just for the pain from her rheumatism, but for "all the pain."¹¹

Back, way back in the life of Mary Tyrone are many of the other sins she feels the need to confess. The fact that--like the derelicts with their pipe dreams in The Iceman Cometh--she is a "one-time" convent girl disturbs her still.¹² It is not the membership in that community in her student days that she regrets, of course, but the fact that she ever left it. Of all the hopes that lie shattered before her--a "decent" home, responsible sons, an understanding husband, a longing for the lost "career" as a concert pianist--none has wounded her quite as deeply as her failure to take vows as a nun. Along with it there is the loss of her faith, for she never seemed to be able to find in marriage the vocation she felt for sisterhood. She is sure there is more than a school-girl fancy for the life in holy orders: she had had personal communion with the Virgin Mary. On the little island in the lake at convent school, she was sure "that the Blessed Virgin had smiled and blessed me

¹¹O'Neill, Long Day's Journey, Act III, p. 103.

¹²Timo Tiusanen, O'Neill's Scenic Images Princeton: (Princeton University Press, 1968), p. 287.

with her consent."¹³ Now, not only that, but her very faith is gone.

Gone, too, is the innocence. She may still possess as her "most appealing quality" a convent-girl charm, "an innate unworldly innocence,"¹⁴ and even, in the play, "be the girl before her marriage,"¹⁵ but the innocence is surely lost. As a "virgin soul misled into marriage,"¹⁶ her former innocence is no more. Through the very experience of love,¹⁷ that is, through her humanity, she has sacrificed her innocence. The keenness of this anguish is that, as "the inverse image of the Earth Mother for whom her sons long,"¹⁸ she has identified herself with the Virgin Mary. Her pardon, and Edmund's cure, are linked to this relationship.

This identification with the Virgin (possible only when she is under the influence of drugs) makes it clear that Mary will be able to perform the "miracle" herself when Edmund is healthy again: she will be able to forgive herself as soon as she knows that her neglect has not destroyed the life of her son. The passage indicated that Mary believes her guilt to be the main obstacle to her happiness. Since this guilt cannot be removed, and since it is impressed on her through the presence of her sons, she has to lie to herself. . . . This "lying" means nothing else but a continuous effort to make herself believe through her own

¹³O'Neill, Long Day's Journey, Act IV, p. 175.

¹⁴Ibid., Act I, p. 13.

¹⁵Raymond Williams, Drama From Ibsen to Brecht (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969), p. 295.

¹⁶Doris Alexander, The Tempering of Eugene O'Neill (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1961), p. 69.

¹⁷Chester Clayton Long, The Role of Nemesis in the Structure of Selected Plays of Eugene O'Neill (The Hague: Mouton, 1968), p. 211.

¹⁸Doris V. Falk, Eugene O'Neill and the Tragic Tension (New Brunswick: Rutgers University, 1958), p. 183.

words and actions that she has preserved her former innocence.¹⁹

Deeply guilt-ridden by all her sins, Mary has even pondered the possibility of taking her own life, conveniently possible through an "accidental" overdose, but she knows that that is the unpardonable sin, for the "Blessed Virgin would never forgive me, then."²⁰ In this strange accumulation of guilt that plagues Mary there is still another fault: having Edmund.

I was afraid all the time I carried Edmund. I knew something terrible would happen. I knew I'd proved by the way I'd left Eugene that I wasn't worthy to have another baby, and that God would punish me if I did. I never should have borne Edmund.²¹

Mary's act of confession begins with the recognition of her loneliness. "But sometimes I feel so lonely,"²² she laments, and, when the others have all left her, Tyrone to the bar, Jamie and Edmund to the doctor, she admits to herself she wanted to be rid of them, but then desperately pleads, "Then Mother of God, why do I feel so lonely?"²³ She turns to this blessed Virgin, who, unlike the Father God who punishes sinners, will always forgive the repentant.²⁴ "Mary's loss of will, or loss of faith in herself, is really due to her loss of faith in the Blessed Virgin Mary. Her withdrawal into the past even takes the form

¹⁹Rolf Scheibler, The Late Plays of Eugene O'Neill (Bern: Francke, 1970), p. 116.

²⁰O'Neill, Long Day's Journey, Act III, p. 121.

²¹Ibid., Act II, Scene 2, p. 88.

²²Ibid., Act I, p. 45.

²³Ibid., Act II, Scene 2, p. 95.

²⁴Raleigh, p. 280.

of a search for her lost faith."²⁵ Mary has never really understood her own plight, the addiction, and all that has gone along with it. "I've never understood anything about it, except that one day long ago I found I could no longer call my soul my own."²⁶ But her penance will not fail; that is her conviction.

Among the many sins Tyrone confesses is a greedy acquisitiveness which, for fear of the phantom of the poor house which had haunted his childhood, has caused him to buy heavily and often foolishly into real estate--even at the expense of his own family's comfort and safety. This fear he insistently projects on the others, always living in cheap, second-rate hotels when they travel, engaging the cheapest doctors, even at the cost of his wife's health, and seeking the cheapest possibility for whatever cure might be had for his consumptive son. Other, personal needs do not always suffer as do the needs of the other family members, though. He prefers his barroom companions to the fellowship at home, and if ever he is generous to a fault, it is there, with near or total strangers, rather than with his own wife and sons--but only when he is happy with drink. Although he claims he never missed a performance because of drink, his wife cannot forget that time--on their honeymoon--that some friends brought home his drunken hulk and deposited it at her hotel room door. If the sons are like their father in this respect, it is not accidental. He even gave them liquor to quiet them as infants. Jamie is sure the old man will send a case of it along with Edmund to

²⁵Leonard Chabrowe, Ritual and Pathos (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1976), p. 176.

²⁶O'Neill, Long Day's Journey, Act III, p. 93.

the sanitarium, and there is an underlying current of a death-wish in the good-hearted toast of Tyrone when he tells Edmund, "Drink hearty, lad."²⁷

While no one ever actually accuses him of it, Tyrone is also guilty of a kind of enslavement of his sons. He keeps them on a dole, always trying to teach them "the value of a dollar," and in his love-hatred for his sons never does allow them to become men. When Jamie belittles the "salary" he has received for working in his father's acting company, Tyrone flays him for his lack of talent:

It's more than you're worth, and you couldn't get that if it wasn't for me. If you weren't my son, there isn't a manager in the business who would give you a part, your reputation stinks so. As it is, I have to humble my pride and beg for you, saying you've turned over a new leaf, although I know it's a lie.²⁸

Tyrone's own acting is a source of guilt; being an actor, Mary always reminds him, is being on the fringes of proper society. To make matters worse, Tyrone has prostituted his own acting talent, selling the hopes of a career as a great Shakespearean actor for the security and cheap fame of being a matinee idol in a profitable melodrama.

Tyrone confesses, too, the weakness of his faith. Although he may kneel daily, night and morning, his practice of the faith desires much. So he owns up to his faults. Not only to excuse his greed, but to explain it, he narrates again the story of his childhood which Edmund has heard a thousand times, but this time Edmund hears and understands.

²⁷Ibid., Act III, p. 111; compare pp. 130, 136, where the toast is repeated.

²⁸Ibid., Act I, pp. 31f.

And Tyrone, confused about the nature of his own wrongs, ponders his selfishness: "What the hell was it I wanted to buy, I wonder, that was worth--Well, no matter. It's a late day for regrets."²⁹

Penance for Tyrone is deeply painful. He must even part with some of that hoarded wealth, for he agrees to send Edmund to any facility where he can receive the best treatment: "Any place you like--within reason!"³⁰ The greater penance is the realization of Mary's regression, in her addiction, to her dreamy past: "She's lost to us again."³¹

Jamie (in reality the last to make his confession) is by many standards the greatest sinner of them all. His sins are obvious, and seldom does he even attempt to hide them. He is a wastrel who prefers above anything else whores, playing the ponies, and booze, and, what is worse, he has all along encouraged his brother to emulate his actions. He is an ingrate, and possesses this irritating habit of sneering at everyone and everything, even the world itself. More seriously, he is accused in the play of having been a childhood murderer, of entering his brother Eugene's room, in spite of warnings, and giving him the measles, from which the infant died. Edmund's sickness, too, is laid to him, for Jamie's encouragement of a dissolute life, the parents feel, led to the weakness that made Edmund vulnerable to consumption. Jamie's uninhibited whoring is an especially keen offense to womankind, and a terrible slap at his mother. Fat Violet, whom he visits this night, as a maternal-

²⁹Ibid., Act IV, p. 150.

³⁰Ibid., Act IV, p. 148.

³¹Ibid., Act III, p. 116.

looking whore, and Mary, who is addicted to the habit of whores, "merge in Jamie's befuddled consciousness as the source of his self-disgust and his need."³² In the final scene Jamie heaps one crude insult upon another, until neither father nor brother can stand his cruelty toward his mother.

Jamie has lost his faith, and this is not so much a result of his many faults as it is a part of it. Yet, he, too, confesses, and his confession is perhaps the sincerest of all. He can call himself a bum and seek pardon repeatedly for his offenses against the others, but it is in his long and heart-rending scene with Edmund that he bares his soul as no other Tyrone. Not only does he admit that what he has been trying to do with Edmund all along is to destroy his brother and thereby elevate his own person, but he begs Edmund to beware, to avoid and forget him in the future, for Edmund's own good. It is a strangely impersonal confession.

Edmund's stammering rhapsody contrasts with Jamie's patchwork of quotations, as Edmund's untutored responses contrast with Jamie's cynical pose. At the same time, the dialogue of Jamie-poseur-quoter prepares for the contrasts with his own climactic, drunken confession. After the maudlin self-pitying quotation, Jamie confesses without using the pronoun "I."³³

Jamie's punishment--he surely does not believe in penance--is a terrifying isolation from the only ones who might ever have understood him. Edmund strikes him, twice, and laments that they never scrap otherwise. His father vows to throw him out, and, worst of all, he loses that one thing he needs most, a mother.

³²Bogard, P. 438.

³³Ruby Cohn, Dialogue in American Drama (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1971), pp. 58f.

It is Edmund who comes off the best in the confessional. He appears more the victim of evil circumstances than the sinner. Tyrone, quoting Shakespeare, even seems to excuse him: "The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars, but in ourselves, that we are underlings."³⁴ There is enough, though, for which to accuse him. He has led a mad and dissipated life, living in dives and wandering to distant lands. His reading habits are a scandal, according to his parents. What his mother found so repulsive that it was unpardonable, suicide, Edmund has attempted. With Jamie, in contrast to the yearning of his mother and the remnants of religion in Tyrone, Edmund has lost his faith. But the "crime" for which Edmund is assailed most often is the fault of being born. It is hinted at by Mary when she remarks how her hair, once of a beautiful reddish shade of brown, began to turn white after his birth. She had been well all her life, until Edmund was born. "But bearing Edmund was the last straw."³⁵ Tyrone suggests to Edmund, "if you hadn't been born she'd never--"³⁶ and Jamie spells it out bluntly: "And it was your being born that started Mama on dope. I know that's not your fault, but all the same, God damn you, I can't help hating your guts--"³⁷ Whatever other debauchery there had been in his life, it is this one guiltless sin that creates the burden of Edmund, this crime of being born.

In his confession, Edmund openly admits all the youthful sins he

³⁴O'Neill, Long Day's Journey, Act IV, p. 152.

³⁵Ibid., Act II, Scene 1, p. 87.

³⁶Ibid., Act IV, p. 142.

³⁷Ibid., Act IV, p. 166.

has been guilty of, even the attempted suicide, which Tyrone claims no son of his would ever try, unless he were drunk. (No, Edmund counters, he was stone cold sober.) But the sin ~~that~~ precipitated, long ago, the evil the family confronts this long day he cannot confess. He doesn't find it possible to apologize for being born.

Yet, there are those things the Tyrones do not forgive, and these remain as specters at the very end. Mary, especially, bears to the end the wrongs done her by the others: Tyrone's miserliness, Jamie's drunkenness, the death of Eugene, the loss of her purity and the birth of Edmund. These ghosts of guilt accompany the Tyrones on their journey into night.

For there is another source of forgiveness which, while denied, is never far from them. O'Neill had written of it in Days Without End (1931-34). There John Loving learns that only before God can there be the forgiveness that can also provide man with the possibility of granting each other forgiveness. The predicament of the Tyrones is suggested in James Tyrone's statement: "When you deny God, you deny hope."³⁸

His orthodoxy, not to mention his hypocrisy, qualifies what he says, but the remark emphasizes the underlying dilemma. As life in a godless world without faith or hope is unlivable, man is ultimately led to the point where he must psychologically die in illusion or physically destroy himself. Such is the total pessimism of the play.³⁹

Nor is the accustomed mediator of that forgiveness of God present.

Hickey was right in suggesting that it wasn't human for any woman to be so pitying and forgiving; it is a divine attribute, proper for the Mother

³⁸Ibid., Act IV, p. 134.

³⁹Chabrowe, p. 176.

of God. But here the one who could alone serve this office fails the others, and in the end withholds the grace so desperately sought. The greatest of human needs is left unsatisfied.

The forgiveness is too little. As often in O'Neill, it is not whole, entire. Mary offers forgiveness to James for his drinking with one sentence, only to take it away with the next, for she can forgive, but not forget! She simply will not let him forget it, either. She, like Emma of the early play, Diff'rent (1920), seems to suggest that her forgiveness will not make any "diff'rence." In yet another sense, the forgiveness is too much, for it demands too great admission on the part of the penitent, too much dependence on the pardoner. And in their desperate need for grace, the Tyrones cannot appreciate the need for justice. For God

. . . represents the universal order of being and cannot act as though he were a "friendly" father, showing sentimental love toward his children. Justice and judgment cannot be suspended in his forgiveness. . . . The consciousness of guilt cannot be overcome by the simple assurance that man is forgiven. Man can believe in forgiveness only if justice is maintained and guilt is confirmed."⁴⁰

It is too late, as the very lateness of the offer suggested in the inscription demonstrates: only O'Neill himself was there to receive that pardon intended for all the haunted Tyrones--the others had died two decades before. In their quest for grace, they denied the source of grace, and she who alone in that human family might have held out to them the promise of grace was not able. Mary Tyrone, the Virgin Mary of the play, was "too far in the past" to know the others, or care. And

⁴⁰Paul Tillich, Systematic Theology (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), I, 288.

as, in a last, pitiful attempt to gain her benediction, her touch of grace, Edmund reaches out to her, she warns him, "You must not try to touch me. You must not try to hold me."⁴¹ The impasse was total: the pardon simply was not there. Even O'Neill's own description admits the incompleteness of any "forgiveness":

A deeply tragic play, but without any violent dramatic action. At the final curtain, there they still are, trapped within each other by the past, each guilty and at the same time innocent, scorning, loving, pitying each other, understanding and yet not understanding at all, forgiving but still doomed never to be able to forget.⁴²

"The final curtain falls on the most pathetic and terrifying scene in the entire canon."⁴³ Forgiveness fails, and they find, "at the apogee of their dissolution, the grace of individual compassion, as Mary acts out before them the tragic impasse of all human existence."⁴⁴

O'Neill would have to write again of this family and of the quest for forgiveness. He did so in his final play, A Moon for the Misbegotten (1943). The play makes a final offer of forgiveness for the Tyrone who fares the worst in Long Day's Journey, Jamie. What Jamie seeks in his visit to the tenant family, the Hogans, is forgiveness--not theirs, of course, but the pardon his mother seemed to withhold from him on her deathbed. Jamie confesses his anxiety, and especially his ugly sin of the cross-country train ride with a whore, to Josie, because "You're

⁴¹O'Neill, Long Day's Journey, Act IV, p. 174.

⁴²Louis Sheaffer, O'Neill, Son and Artist (Boston: Little, Brown, 1973), p. 509.

⁴³Falk, p. 191.

⁴⁴Long, p. 215.

like her deep in your heart."⁴⁵ Slowly, almost reluctantly, Josie brings herself to where she admits she can understand Jamie, and finally forgive him, as the only "one in the world you know loves you enough to understand and forgive."⁴⁶ When Jamie seems dissatisfied with her forgiveness, since it is his mother's he yearns for, Josie assures him: "As she forgives, do you hear me! As she loves and understands and forgives!"⁴⁷ And as Jamie, sobbing, buries his face in Josie's breast, she adds, "She hears. I feel her in the moonlight, her soul wrapped in it like a silver mantle, and I know she understands and forgives me, too, and her blessing lies on me."⁴⁸ As Jamie ends his sobbing and falls asleep, the picture of the dying Son upon the Virgin's bosom, Josie concludes sadly: "That's right. Sleep in peace, my darling. . . . Oh, Jim, Jim, maybe my love could still save you, if you could want it enough. . . . No. That can never be."⁴⁹

When Jamie at last leaves his Earth Mother who has acted in the stead of the Virgin Mother whose peace he really desired, he leaves the one person who has come the closest to understanding, and forgiving him. Her wish--surely the author's wish as well--for Jamie's eternal rest in peace and forgiveness, cannot command the forgiveness of a God who is dead, through the Mediation of a Virgin Mother who is gone. But Josie

⁴⁵Eugene O'Neill, A Moon for the Misbegotten (New York: Vintage, 1973), Act III, p. 98.

⁴⁶*Ibid.*, p. 99.

⁴⁷*Ibid.*

⁴⁸*Ibid.*

⁴⁹*Ibid.*, p. 100.

has offered Jamie a night of peace, through the greatest gift a member of O'Neill's dramatic world can offer another: she has forgiven him. This his haunted heroes often have, but while they enjoy the pardon of the other troubled souls, they seem to be reminded of another forgiveness that is not theirs. The human pardon seems only to point up a need that is not met, one for which they ever long. They reach toward that which they cannot grasp.

With the failure of forgiveness, the dramatic world of the author offers few options. Man can count himself among the misbegotten, and surely Edmund is intended for that fate, mistakenly conceived as he was. Yet, the "quintessential O'Neill character can neither be nor not be. He longs for an indifferent existence, which he cannot have and would not rest in content if he could."⁵⁰ He could plunge into that metaphysical chaos again, out of the brief spell of existence in that human world. Or, he might turn in upon his own world, his created world, and that is where he surely is: left at last in his aesthetic world.

⁵⁰Raleigh, p. 170.

Chapter 7

RETREAT FROM FAITH TO ART

Of a Broadway production of O'Neill's A Touch of the Poet, one critic wrote: "O'Neill's magnificent obsession was that a life of illusions is unpardonable but that a life without illusions is unbearable. This produces the fierce tension at the heart of his dramatic imagination."¹ While O'Neill may have used the idea of the pipe dream in several of his plays, especially the later plays, it is likely that there is more content in his drama beyond the mere display of the tension between the necessity and the folly of the illusion. The content of his plays is of a specific religious nature, centering around the desperate search for forgiveness at the hands of a mother figure, whether the Mother of God of the author's early Catholicism or the Earth Mother to whom he turned when his early faith failed him. But the power of his dramatic imagination is, in large part, from "illusion" in yet another sense. What he created on the stage was a perception of reality that, while mere "illusion" to some, became "life" to the dramatist. For O'Neill, art became reality. The faith that failed in life could not just be rejected, or relegated to some corner of mind and experience which became the repository for unsuccessful and unworkable ideals; it had to be escaped. And it was to his art that O'Neill fled, there, where he could experience a meaning and a sense of fulfillment that eluded him in life.

¹T. E. Kalem, "Dream Addict," Time Magazine, CXI (January 9, 1978), 68.

Faith has been treated in different ways in twentieth-century literature. There are basically three modes of treatment of traditional faith that have been apparent in this literature. These approaches to religion in modern literature might be described as the rejection of faith, the reaffirmation of faith, and the restatement of faith.

Perhaps the most common reaction to faith in contemporary literature has been that of rejection. Particularly in American literature, from around the time that O'Neill himself began his literary efforts, the prevalent attitude among writers seemed to be to discard all traditional faith. It is expressed as a kind of hopelessness in this statement from F. Scott Fitzgerald, from a letter he wrote to his daughter:

Not one person in ten thousand finds time . . . to form what for lack of a better phrase, I might call the wise and tragic sense of life. By this I mean . . . the sense that life is essentially a cheat and its conditions are . . . those of defeat.²

This rejection of faith varied from author to author, but it invariably involved a denial of the theological beliefs as well as the traditional morality of the Judeo-Christian West. These were the authors of whom Gertrude Stein remarked, "You are all a lost generation"---a statement Ernest Hemingway chose as epigraph for his first novel, The Sun Also Rises.

This Lost Generation found substitutes for the faith they had rejected. Novelists like Faulkner---not unlike O'Neill in drama---took from the "science of psychoanalysis what he could put to creative use: namely, those insights that confirmed his own observations and exper-

² Cited by Robert Clurman in The New York Times Book Review (August 5, 1956), 8.

iences."³ Perhaps that to which these authors paid homage, that power they saw behind such forces as the new science of human behavior, were the forces of nature, and so their style has been described as the naturalistic reinterpretation of fate. Such is the case with the autobiographical hero of Hemingway's Island in the Stream, who looks out upon the sea from his home on Bimini, and speaks of the sea that has become his god, or rather has taken the place of the god he has rejected. What these authors rejected may really have been for them--as in the experience of O'Neill--a totally unsatisfactory experience of religion. "Atheism in the modern artist represents a kind of purification, a transitional phase, a purification from second-hand and obsolete religious habits, a purging of inferior consolations, hopes and sentiments."⁴ Yet, the rejection was very real. There is no return to the hopes and beliefs of an earlier faith; it is a total rejection of faith.

There are other modern writers, fewer perhaps but no less significant, and seemingly more of them British than American, for whom rejection of the faith was neither necessary nor satisfactory. These instead saw fit to reaffirm the traditional beliefs. They range from Roman Catholic, as Graham Greene, to Anglo-Catholic and Anglican, as W. H. Auden and T. S. Eliot, to Protestants, as in the case of John Updike. These authors are often deeply committed to their respective traditions, however much aware of modern culture and philosophy they might be. Often,

³Charles I. Glicksberg, The Sexual Revolution in Modern American Literature (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1971), p. 99.

⁴Amos N. Wilder, Theology and Modern Literature (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1958), p. 35.

they have found modern philosophy of great value in understanding and interpreting their faith, especially the philosophy of Christian existentialism.⁵ In a discussion of the contributions of that philosophy to Christian theology, Tillich writes:

In a long talk in London with T. S. Eliot, who is really considered to be an existentialist. . . . I told him, "I believe that you cannot answer the question you develop in your plays and your poems on the basis of your plays and poems, because they only develop the question--they describe human existence. But if there is an answer, it comes from somewhere else." He replied, "That is exactly what I am fighting for all the time. I am, as you know, an Episcopalian." And he is really a faithful Episcopalian; he answers as an Episcopalian but not as an existentialist. This means that the existentialist raises the question and analyzes the human situation to which the theologian can then give the answer, an answer given not from the question but from somewhere else, and not from the human situation itself.⁶

In this way these writers often reaffirm the faith. Their works do not so much promote their beliefs as they describe the human dilemma to which that faith provides an answer. Auden claimed that every poet believed not only that this historical world was a fallen world, but that it was redeemable.⁷ Thus their reaffirmation of faith stands in stark contrast to the writers who have rejected the faith, for whom the world holds out so little hope.

A third attitude toward faith can be found among those who can neither affirm the tradition nor reject it: they prefer a restatement

⁵See, for example, George W. Hunt, "Kierkegaardian Sensations into Real Fiction: John Updike's 'The Astronomer,'" Christianity and Literature, XXVI (Spring 1977), 3-17.

⁶Paul Tillich, Theology of Culture (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959), p. 125.

⁷W. H. Auden, "The Virgin and the Dynamo," in his The Dyer's Hand and other essays (New York: Random House, 1962), pp. 69f.

of the traditional belief. In a response to the Nobel Committee, Saul

Bellow recognized this inability to assume the faith of the fathers:

In an age of science people still painted and wrote poetry but, said Hegel, however splendid the gods looked in modern works of art and whatever dignity and perfection we might fight "in the images of God the Father and the Virgin Mary," it was of no use: We no longer bent our knees.⁸

Bellow, of Jewish background as are many of the writers who might fit this category, will not deny faith, but neither can he embrace it.

It would surely be stretching a point to call Saul Bellow a religious writer. Professing no allegiance to any theological system, he deals in his novels with problems which are not, in the strict sense, religious; most of his protagonists are Jews, but Judaism is not of much importance in their lives; and, while admitting that certain kinds of humanism--the "spilt religion" of romanticism, say--suffer from a distasteful "dampness," Bellow finds a "bottled religion" . . . equally unpalatable. . . .

And yet, despite his apparent indifference to the more fashionable aspects of the current "revival of religion" among literary men, Bellow's novels reveal that he is just as deeply concerned, in his own way, with matters of the spirit as some of his more manifestly religious contemporaries.⁹

For Bellow, and other writers like him, such as Bernard Malamud, there is an undeniable spiritual element beyond man, and yet a constant presence. And it is through art that this element is realized. "There is another reality, the genuine one, which we lose sight of. This other reality is always sending us hints, which, without art, we can't receive."¹⁰ With Marcel Proust, Bellow calls these hints "true impressions," and says of them:

⁸Saul Bellow, "The Challenge," Los Angeles Times, January 30, 1977, Sec. IV, p. 3, col. 3.

⁹Robert H. Fossum, "The Devil and Saul Bellow," in George A. Panichas (ed.) Mansions of the Spirit (New York: Hawthorne, 1967), pp. 345f.

¹⁰Bellow, p. 3, col. 2.

The essence of our real condition . . . is shown to us in glimpses, in . . . "true impressions." This essence reveals, and then conceals itself. When it goes away, it leaves us again in doubt. But we never seem to lose our connection with the depths from which these glimpses come.

. . . We are reluctant to talk about this because there is nothing we can prove, because our language is inadequate and because few people are willing to risk talking about it. They would have to say, "There is a spirit," and that is taboo. So almost everyone keeps quiet about it, although almost everyone is aware of it.

The value of literature lies in these intermittent "true impressions." A novel moves back and forth between the world of objects, of actions, of appearances, and that other world from which these "true impressions" come and which moves us to believe that the good we hang on to so tenaciously--in the face of evil, so obstinately--is no illusion.¹¹

What these authors seem to possess is the sense of the community of faith, although they no longer hold to the theology of that community. Unable to bring themselves to the position of rejecting the faith outright, they prefer to restate their sense of belief in a way that makes them more comfortable with the modern world.

Each of these three modes of response to faith proved untenable to Eugene O'Neill. While he spoke openly and often, throughout his life, of his rejection of the faith in which he was raised, there was really more of a rejection of the form than of the essence. While he never returned to the Mother Church, neither could he fully escape from the memory of her embrace. There remained a Catholic conscience in the playwright that constantly asserts itself, in both life and drama, in the feelings of guilt and the yearning for forgiveness. But something--the complex interrelationships between author and mother figures, really--would not allow a reaffirmation of his faith. Days Without End (1931-34) was

¹¹ Ibid., col. 4.

such an attempt, and whatever lack of success it might have had on the stage is greatly overshadowed by the utter failure of its author to make anything like a satisfying pilgrimage back to the faith, as John Loving did at play's end. This same involvement that would not let go of O'Neill made it impossible for him to succeed in any kind of rewriting the faith to suit modern philosophy or his own spiritual demands. O'Neill simply could not come to terms with faith.

There remained but one possible treatment of faith for the dramatist: a retreat from faith to art. In his art, O'Neill came closest to finding that salvation he had lost when he rejected the church, and could never really replace in his personal relationships. Nor was he alone in turning to art for something to replace the lost faith. While it is unlikely that O'Neill knew much of him--if he knew of him at all--a man who died the year O'Neill was born is still remembered for his ideas on salvation through art: the English poet Matthew Arnold. Arnold, like O'Neill, had rejected the faith of his tradition. He was to find orthodox Christianity untenable as a belief for modern intelligent man. While people had ingeniously argued these traditional beliefs, fought to defend them, more commonly simply swallowed them, no one found peace or enjoyment in them, not even really understood them. In a poem written on the occasion of a visit to a French monastery, Arnold wrote:

For rigorous teachers seized my youth,
And purged its faith, and trimmed its fire,
Showed me the high, white star of Truth,
There bade me gaze, and there aspire.
Even now their whispers pierce the gloom:
What hast thou in this living tomb?¹²

¹²Matthew Arnold, "Stanzas from the Grande Chartreuse," in his Poetical Works (London: Oxford, 1966), p. 301.

He became, he continued, one of the lost:

Wandering between two worlds, one dead.
The other powerless to be born,
With nowhere yet to rest my head,
Like these, on earth I wait forlorn.¹³

Yet, for Arnold, science and positivism, in large part responsible for demonstrating that religion was no longer viable, left man with a void that only art could fill. Any defense against the attacks of positivism and science could result only in "the usurpation by poetry of the place of religion."¹⁴

A similar attitude is found in an author O'Neill did know, one who had a tremendous influence on the attitudes of the dramatist and was much loved by him for his tales of the sea, the novelist Joseph Conrad. In the preface to The Nigger of the Narcissus, which had convinced Conrad that he was through with the sea and would spend the rest of his life as a writer, he wrote:

A work that aspires, however humbly, to the condition of art should carry its justification in every line. And art itself may be defined as a single-minded attempt to render the highest kind of justice to the visible universe, by bringing to light the truth, manifold and one, underlying its every aspect.¹⁵

But it is in the writings of the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche that O'Neill encountered the highly-developed philosophy of salvation through art that was to have the greatest influence on the understanding of his own art.

¹³Ibid., p. 302.

¹⁴Nathan A. Scott, Jr., Modern Literature and the Religious Frontier (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1958), p. 13.

¹⁵Joseph Conrad, The Nigger of the Narcissus (Garden City: Doubleday, 1914), p. 11.

It is largely in The Birth of Tragedy that Nietzsche traces his own retreat from faith to art, his belief in salvation through aesthetics. It was a work that was to prove a tremendous influence on O'Neill, the finest work on the art of drama, according to the playwright. There were a number of ideas of the philosopher, both from this book and from Thus Spake Zarathustra, that impressed themselves upon O'Neill's thinking and writing. The notion of the death of God in the philosopher's writings may have been an early attraction to the young O'Neill as he wrestled with his growing disillusionment with his inherited faith. In neither philosopher nor dramatist was this idea the source of any kind of militant atheism. Nietzsche claimed no more responsibility for the idea than any one who might pronounce what should have been evident to all, as he protests in his work, Joyful Wisdom. The pessimism and nihilism of the philosopher also find their way into the plays of O'Neill, especially through his theme of the *Misbegotten*. But perhaps the greatest influence the philosopher was to have on O'Neill was in the area of aesthetics. For Nietzsche, man himself was a work of art and the world needed to be viewed as a play composed by a poet who had in mind no purpose beyond the play itself. "We have every right to view ourselves as aesthetic projections of the veritable creator and derive such dignity as we possess from our status as art works. Only as an aesthetic product can the world be justified to all eternity."¹⁶

Nietzsche's theory of art derives from his studies of Greek drama, and especially from Aeschylus, whom he felt to be the height of

¹⁶Friedrich Nietzsche, The Birth of Tragedy (Garden City: Doubleday, 1956), pp. 41f.

dramatic expression in ancient Greece. He saw conflict between the individuality of Apollonian plastic arts and the participation of Dionysian music. The former, he felt, failed to realize the tragic pain of life. Only through the Dionysian art was there a direct expression of the pain of life, seen for Nietzsche in the chorus of Greek drama. It is by way of this expression of the pain of life that art gives meaning to life. Nor is it only that the art dramatizes this meaning: the gods themselves entered into the drama and so "justified human life by living it themselves--the only satisfactory theodicy ever invented."¹⁷

Art, thus, is salvation. The only triumph over pessimism possible is through the position of the creative artist. Art is stronger than pessimism, "more divine than truth."¹⁸ Art becomes the counter-movement to the decadence Nietzsche saw in religion, morality and philosophy. Art, understood in the sense of Dionysian participation, provided an identification of the self with the "primal unity" and "a sort of individual redemption from life through transcendence of the Apollonian individuality."¹⁹ Nietzsche believed that "each individual becomes not only reconciled to his fellow but actually at one with him--as though the veil of Maya had been torn apart and there remained only shreds floating before the vision of mystical Oneness."²⁰ Art not only

¹⁷Ibid., p. 30.

¹⁸Friedrich Nietzsche, The Will to Power (New York: Random House, 1967), p. 453.

¹⁹John E. Smith, "Nietzsche: The Conquest of the Tragic Through Art," in Nathan A. Scott, Jr. (ed.) The Tragic Vision and the Christian Faith (New York: Association Press, 1957), p. 218.

²⁰Nietzsche, The Birth of Tragedy, p. 26.

raises the question--as so often understood in theological criticism--but offers the answer as well, namely, the art itself. Art becomes a substitute for religion. It orders what in life is disordered, and provides, said Nietzsche, "metaphysical comfort," which "justifies and redeems existence."²¹ Art provides the assurance that "life flows on, indestructibly, beneath the whirlpool of appearances."²²

Perhaps nowhere else did the philosopher have so great an influence on O'Neill as through this, his theory of aesthetics. O'Neill paid his homage to Nietzsche, as did the playwright who influenced O'Neill most, August Strindberg.²³ But O'Neill knew the philosopher's works first-hand; at age eighteen he read Thus Spake Zarathustra, which proved a life-long influence on him. He claimed, some twenty years after first discovering Nietzsche through this work that it had influenced him more than any other book he had ever read. It became a bible to him, as he reread it "every year or so" and carried a copy with him, even on his travels. There are many examples of how the book influenced individual plays.²⁴ The almost exclusive use of tragedy in O'Neill's dramatic efforts is sure evidence of the strong influence of Nietzsche, and even the choice of the trilogy of Aeschylus as the idea for Mourning Becomes

²¹Smith, p. 223.

²²Nietzsche, The Birth of Tragedy, p. 108.

²³See especially Sophus Keith Winther, "Strindberg and O'Neill: A Study of Influence," Scandinavian Studies, XXXI (August 1959), 103-120. Frederic Fleisher concluded the influence on O'Neill was much greater from Nietzsche than from Strindberg: "Strindberg and O'Neill," Symposium, X (Spring 1956), 84-93.

²⁴See, for example, Michael Hinden, "Irony Use of Myth in The Hairy Ape," The Eugene O'Neill Newsletter, I (January 1978), 2ff.

Electra (1929-31) exhibits the devotion of O'Neill to the philosopher's beliefs. Even the emphasis on the lyric poet in Nietzsche stands as a painful reminder of the strong desire in O'Neill to control words more effectively than he did, of his wish to have more than "a touch of the poet." Yet, over all this stands the most important influence of all: Nietzsche's aesthetics--art as salvation.

Having nothing "outside himself to believe in,"²⁵ O'Neill could express meaning only through his art. Faith and art by no means need be at odds,²⁶ but they became so in O'Neill. Art was his retreat from faith, his hope for the realization of some sense of salvation. What Tillich wrote of existential literature as a whole might well be applied to O'Neill:

In existentialist literature, not only in novels and poems and dramas but even in philosophy, it is difficult to distinguish clearly the boundary line between men's universal existential situation based on finitude and estrangement on the one hand, and man's psychosomatic disease which is considered an attempt to escape from this situation and its anxieties by fleeing into a mental fortress.²⁷

From whatever cause, O'Neill did flee into the "mental fortress" he built for himself, his drama. "Aesthetics took the place of formal religion with him, art made life livable. He tried to convert the theater back into a church because he had a deep psychological need to do so."²⁸ The

²⁵Winifred L. Frazer, E. G. and E. G. O.; Emma Goldman and The Iceman Cometh (Gainesville: University Presses of Florida, 1974), p. 80.

²⁶Wilder, p. 22; see also Northrop Frye, Spiritus Mundi (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976), p. 121.

²⁷Tillich, p. 118.

²⁸Leonard Chabrowe, Ritual and Pathos (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1976), p. 189.

theater became a place of worship for him.

O'Neill was quite aware of his retreat from faith into art. Of the sudden abandonment of the cycle O'Neill had worked on for many years to write his "memory plays," including The Iceman Cometh (1939), Frazer writes:

Trying different titles--The Hair of the Dog, A Touch of the Poet, The Greed of the Meek, and And Give Me Death--as well as different plots for each long play, he almost lost his mind as, seeking release in creativity, he sank toward death. But suddenly he put aside the cycle and wrote the two plays out of his past which, by portraying his sense of guilt and the illusion of all life, brought forth the relief of confession. In admitting to himself that he had betrayed the cause in retreating from life into art, he thereby admitted that art is illusion.²⁹

While O'Neill's creativity may have proven self-defeating³⁰ there is still the record of his drama--including no less the later plays than the others--of his personal retreat from the failures of faith into the comparative meaning of his dramatic creation. Of such writers, Glicksberg notes:

The modern writer, distrusting like Nietzsche the validity of the truth his intelligence wrests from the mysterious universe, resigns himself with a bad grace to a purely aesthetic resolution of the problem of existence. He begins to doubt, too, the value of his dedication to art. For he has come to feel that he has lost the tragic sense of life. His metaphysical passion has become self-conscious, critical, and destructive as it fights in vain the fatality of the myth of nothingness.³¹

²⁹Frazer, p. 95.

³⁰Ibid., p. 93.

³¹Charles I. Glicksberg, "Modern Literature and the Death of God," from his Modern Literature and the Death of God (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1966), reprinted in G. B. Tennyson and Edward E. Ericson, Jr. (eds.) Religion and Modern Literature (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), p. 140.

But it had been otherwise, had those elements O'Neill wished for the theater actually been present. He had desired much more for the theater than he ever realized from it. He had sought not just a place of refuge but a place of worship. It was the religious character of drama that O'Neill wanted to project, for it was his belief that "all tragic drama is essentially religious in origin and in effect,"³² and was designed to induce a kind of religious experience.

But the would-be writer of tragedy today labors under an almost insuperable difficulty. He lives in a society most of whose members are either confused and uncertain or explicitly deny that any such relationship between man and God exists; that there are any problems to solve except problems to be faced by men so entirely the product of temporary conditions, that even their past is no more than a ghost which it is their business to lay as promptly as possible.³³

Thus, drama would enable the spectator--the co-participant in theater--to find significance both in the struggles of the hero and the struggles of his own existence. Even modern man could "see the transfiguring nobility of tragedy, in as near the Greek sense as one can grasp it, in seemingly the most ignoble, debased lives."³⁴ Through theater there could develop a renewed sense of community, of the oneness of humankind. It was not that O'Neill wanted to find a comfortable place where he might hide from others, but a place to share the desperate feelings common to men. For all the alienation he's noted for, in spite of an aloofness

³²Frederic I. Carpenter, Eugene O'Neill (New York: Twayne, 1964), p. 53.

³³Joseph Wood Krutch, The American Drama since 1918 (New York: Braziller, 1957), p. 105.

³⁴Eugene O'Neill, "Neglected Poet," in Oscar Cargill, N. Bryllion Fagin and William J. Fisher (eds.) O'Neill and His Plays (New York: New York University Press, 1961), p. 125.

which grew to the point of reclusion in his later years, O'Neill believed in the sense of community, as the close-knit microcosm of the habitués of Harry Hope's bar surely demonstrates.

Yet, the theater was to be more than a mere human community for O'Neill. The unity that community bore was a religious unity; the theater was to be a place of worship. It was here that he carried on his life-long search for the answer to his spiritual longings. He did not merely dramatize the conflicts of his own life: he made them into religious experiences, and hence an understanding of his conception of religious theater is necessary for understanding his work.³⁵

O'Neill's desire to make of the theater a place of worship--not unlike the center of worship it had been in earliest theater--was not something he held alone, nor even developed on his own. He felt it, in fact, as a shared desire. Theater of Tomorrow, a manifesto by Kenneth Macgowan published in 1921, inspired O'Neill with its talk of the restoration of the theater to its original and proper function, the expression of godhead; the need to make the theater spiritually independent of the church; and the desire to use the theater to enable man to recover his sense of unity with the forces of nature.³⁶ O'Neill felt the problem that much more acutely since the modern audience did share that confused, uncertain attitude toward religion. They "had no general religious basis, no common fund of tradition to which they may refer the

³⁵ Chabrowe, pp. xiif.

³⁶ Edwin A. Engle, The Haunted Heroes of Eugene O'Neill (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1953), p. 35.

greatest problems with which we are all concerned."³⁷ He felt himself as much as anyone a victim of this modern sickness, and his search was his own before he ever saw it as that of modern man generally. So the theater became a place of worship for him. He designed theatrical effects as "massive assaults" on the sensitivities of the usually lethargic audiences, with their "suspended disbelief," that they might become thoroughly involved in the action of the drama.³⁸ He wrote of this when describing his intentions in Lazarus Laughed (1925-26), which he called "A Play for an Imaginative Theatre" and which strived toward

. . . a theatre returned to its highest and sole significant function as a Temple where the religion of a poetical interpretation and symbolical celebration of life is communicated to human beings, starved in spirit by their soul-stifling daily struggle to exist as masks among the masks of the living! . . .

He hopes . . . someday to write plays in which the audience could share as a congregation shares in the music and ritual of a church service. "There must be some way that this can be brought about," he said.³⁹

All the ghosts, the illusions, the evils, were to give way to the power of the worshiping community of the theater. "The exorcising could only take place through the performance of rituals that were communal in nature."⁴⁰ The only alternative to the unsuccessful but desperate search for forgiveness, which failed before both Mother of God and Earth Mother, and left man to the fate of the Misbegotten, was the escape into drama,

³⁷Barrett H. Clark, "Aeschylus and O'Neill," English Journal, XXI (November 1932), 709.

³⁸Travis Bogard, Contour in Time (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), p. xiv.

³⁹Arthur and Barbara Gelb, O'Neill (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), p. 602.

⁴⁰Chabrowe, p. xii.

the one place where O'Neill seemed to feel he could really belong.

It is O'Neill's retreat from faith into art that becomes an obstacle to critics in the school of theological criticism. While it is generally accepted among them that there is really no such thing as "an autonomous Christian criticism or Christian aesthetics,"⁴¹ it is also quite generally agreed that any suggestion of substitution of art for faith somehow makes this critical approach quite difficult, if not impossible: "we must not substitute art for God,"⁴² Such substitution is described in this way:

There is, however, a significant difference between tragic and biblical irony. In both cases, irony is the result of ignorance. But in tragedy, this ignorance is the inevitable consequence of the human condition, of the hero's involvement in the necessities of action. For the Bible, it is due to willing self-deception, and therefore affects only the person who forsakes the Lord. From the biblical point of view, the crowning irony is reserved for the person who seeks to avoid it through aesthetic detachment.⁴³

Yet, even though O'Neill is guilty of this cardinal error--from the standpoint of theological criticism--it can still be both possible and profitable to examine his works from the position of the discipline of religion and literature. While the O'Neill corpus, since it exhibits an ambivalent attitude on faith--denying it while earnestly seeking its primary benefit, forgiveness--cannot be examined as a reflection of any theological system, it can be observed for whatever religious statement

⁴¹Wilder, p. 65.

⁴²Dorothy Sayers, "Toward a Christian Aesthetic," in Nathan A. Scott, Jr. (ed.) The New Orpheus (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1964), p. 20.

⁴³Edmond LaB. Cherbonnier, "Biblical Faith and the Idea of Tragedy," in Scott, The Tragic Vision, pp. 45f.

it makes.

While one may legitimately theologize about the nature of art, efforts to ferret out "theology" in writers such as Faulkner, Camus, Graham Greene, or Dostoevski, or in film directors such as Fellini, Bresson, or Bergman, too frequently end up in dogma hunting. What one finds in art--literary, cinematic, or other--is not theology but religion.⁴⁴

Especially when the aesthetic stance of an author causes him to look out from within his own art, which was surely the way O'Neill viewed the world, his rejection of all other systems forces the critic to risk imposing a system on that author that is then essentially meaningless to his art. Far better to look at the world which the author has created, into which he invites and lures his audience, there to participate in those human experiences, criticizing them for their own integrity as human experiences. In such a way can the movement that attempts to view literature on its religious level come at last to grips with Eugene O'Neill, there within his literature, where he sought, and where alone he found his refuge.

⁴⁴Philip C. Rule, "Reflections on the Religious Dimensions of the Film," Christian Scholar's Review, VII (1977), 37.

Chapter 8

ICONS OF MERCY

A legitimate question to ask of such a study as this is its relevance for the discipline of criticism from the standpoint of religion and literature. Particularly pertinent is the question of what significance the playwright's created world holds for an understanding of modern man. If that world is a purely private world, shared only by the few whose unusual thought and behavioral patterns happen to match those of the artist, it can be regarded as little more than a curiosity. If it is the world of a man hopelessly engulfed in neurosis, it can provide only the materials for a study of abnormal behavior. But if it is a world not unlike those inhabited by modern men in general, its contemplation is of worth in the attempt to view the human situation; furthermore, to understand that world in the light of the Christian proclamation is to understand all the better the way in which the dialogue between faith and the modern man can proceed. For man is inclined to create a "world" of his own, aesthetic or otherwise, and to retreat into its refuge. That world has its own religious system, that is, its own valuation of ultimate concern and it would seem an understanding of such a world could best be had from within, as perhaps the only means of creating a proper climate for dialogue.

The world O'Neill has created in his artistic efforts would appear to be such a world, significant in its meaning and worthy of attention. While writing of the past, especially in his later plays, and often of people who are far from typical modern men--artists and

prostitutes, for example--his work gains its representative quality primarily from that very religious character O'Neill insisted upon: the search for a god in a godless world. And it is in the desperate drive for forgiveness that the people of his world display that quality that forms the core of his artistic efforts, man's demand for a relationship with something beyond himself, a means of belonging. As Martin Buber says:

Man's threefold living relation is, first, his relation to the world and to things, second, his relation to men--both to individuals and to the many--third, his relation to the mystery of being--which is dimly apparent through all this but infinitely transcends it--which the philosopher calls the Absolute and the believer calls God, and which cannot in fact be eliminated from the situation even by a man who rejects both designations.¹

It is this relation that occupied the concern of the playwright, and that makes his a fitting and representative world for modern man, a world worth viewing.

It is a characteristic of that world that it is a place where men still search. As one of the "millions of searchers for gods that failed them,"² O'Neill never ceased to be concerned that modern man had lost the "old gods," but still yearned for that man-God relationship it was his original intent to write about. The object of that search, however it might be posed in the plays, is a relationship the most adequate description of which is forgiveness. As opposed to any reactions to faith that would reject the traditional religious goal of western man, salvation, or

¹Martin Buber, Between Man and Man (New York: Macmillan, 1948), p. 177.

²Oscar Cargill, N. Bryllion Fagin and William J. Fisher (eds.) O'Neill and His Plays (New York: New York University Press, 1961), p. 9.

somehow transform it, O'Neill sets out in the plays in search of forgiveness. In spite of the ultimate failure of that search, in spite of the truth that the artist never gained a forgiveness beyond human pardon, he creates in the plays images of this search which abound in meaning for a faith the primary design of which is to offer the grace of God in forgiveness. These icons of mercy help to create a picture of modern man in his godless world, in quest for the pardon he needs, but can hardly receive for want of a pardoner in that world of his. Thus, the implications of what O'Neill writes about this search for forgiveness are of utmost significance for the dialogue between religion and literature.

If man's need for forgiveness, for the restoration of the relationship between man and something beyond him, is powerfully put in O'Neill's works, so also is man's need for confession. Even as the Catholicism he knew as a child demanded an often painful admission of wrongdoing, so the characters in the plays are never let off easy. Confession is a serious matter to the characters. They neither make light of it, nor dare to ignore it. When Caleb in Diff'rent (1920) chooses to ignore his offense--one which his people assume will quite commonly occur in the life of a seaman--that choice catches up with him, and he is forced to make a confession that is all the more painful since he has been "caught" by Emma, his intended, and must make a confession he had thought to escape. The plays, many of which consist of long confessions, and most of which come around to confession at some place or other, have taken for granted the need man has to admit his wrongs. In the light of so grave a concern over confession--even the sort of lengthy, soul-

searching and detailed confessions of Long Day's Journey (1940-41)--the trend in Christianity that would deny such necessity of confession, especially the enumeration of sins, would seem to suggest that the playwright was out of touch with modern man. On the contrary, if literature in the twentieth century is at all honest with respect to the human situation, it may be suggesting to Christianity that neither the passing over of confession nor its relegation to the analyst's chambers is what modern man really needs--or even wants. Even in the playwright's early religious home, Catholicism, the practice of the confessional has been seriously called into question today, and fallen quite out of repute in many quarters. It may be that literature, and perhaps especially these works, might point the way to a reexamination of man's need to verbalize his anxieties over his past, to express in words that which has caused him to experience his feelings of alienation.

In O'Neill, mercy is mediated. In keeping with the backgrounds of his lost faith, the author often employed the images of priesthood. This is especially striking in the plays which have women who serve as Earth Mothers and priestesses, such as The Great God Brown (1925) and A Moon for the Misbegotten (1943). Cybel as priestess pronounces the benediction upon both Dion Anthony and William Brown. Josie Hogan acts the part of the priestess when she speaks words of forgiveness over Jamie Tyrone's sleeping form, and when she pronounces the benediction at his departure. But even where no priestess appears to mediate forgiveness, what forgiveness occurs comes through other people. In Long Day's Journey, the response to confessions is an expression of understanding. But there are no direct experiences of forgiveness, no instances of a

sense of certainty that there is forgiveness, without this mediation, in what can best be described as acts of a priestly character. Even when forgiveness is rejected, as is often true in the plays, it is express forgiveness that is refused, and not a forgiveness the character merely assumes exists. Evelyn does not simply tolerate Hickey's behavior in The Iceman Cometh (1939), however much that might reflect a forgiving spirit; she makes Hickey keenly aware of the offer of forgiveness she holds out to him. Christianity, too, employs such mediators of mercy. Nor does it confine such expression of pardon to those specifically ordained to pronounce it: all believers share in that office, not only by right but by way of duty. As the Tyrones are dependent upon each other for whatever forgiveness they can wrest from their sober situation, so members of the human family must rely on the mediation of forgiveness through one another. While priesthood may serve as a special focus of redemptive activity, it must always be recognized that the power and the responsibility of declaring forgiveness falls to those who stand in closest relationship to the ones in need of forgiveness.

Theater, for O'Neill, was not a place of entertainment, but a place of worship. Hence, ritual images abound in his drama. Acts of devotion are performed, as when Ruben Light embraces the generator in Dynamo (1928). Ritual processions occur, as in Mourning Becomes Electra (1929-31), when the townspeople serve as a Greek chorus in procession. The power of amulets is called upon, as when Mat in "Anna Christie" shows his cross. There are also ritual expressions of forgiveness, particularly the use of touch. In Long Day's Journey, there is a constant interplay of accusation and understanding, accompanied often by alter-

nating violence and embrace. Mary, for example, slaps Edmund and immediately embraces him. As the expression of love and pardon is offered, the words are thus accompanied by the visual support of it. And when the ultimate forgiveness, that more-than-human pardon so earnestly sought in the play, fails, its failure is expressed by the withholding of the physical demonstration of grace. Mary rejects Edmund's plea, not just for simple recognition of his presence and acknowledgment of his serious problem, but for the meaningful touch of her hand. Acting, by that time, in her deep morphine trance, as the character out of her own past, yet also as the Mother of God, she refuses this act of grace, this laying on of hands that might have assured Edmund of a restored relationship. Clearly, the act Edmund desired of Mary was a ritual act, connected with his need for forgiveness. While it would be expected that ideas such as pardon would be accompanied in drama by appropriate gestures, this serves to point also to the significance of such gestures in life itself. There is as much need for visual representation to accompany spiritual truths off as well as on the stage. Ritual remains a primary need for man, and the steady erosion of ritualistic action in liturgy can only let man ever more bereft of those visual images that serve as a reminder of the spiritual truths behind them. In the careful, almost antiseptic forms of worship that have evolved in much of Christendom, such displays that offer images of religious truths are wanting. The very gesture Edmund yearned for, the laying on of hands, is ancient in Christian liturgy. Such visual representations become meaningful to man in his primary experience, the sense of touch, and offer non-verbal support as physical demonstration of spiritual realities.

There is in the plays also an express verbalization of pardon. These pronouncements suggest the inadequacy of a general sense of forgiveness, or of unspoken forgiveness. In no way do the characters sense that they are forgiven; they must be told that they are forgiven. Where forgiveness fails, such failure is often shown by the impossibility of expressing pardon. Mary Tyrone is gone, into her past, and since she is not present, there is no possibility of her pronouncing forgiveness upon her desperate men. More often, the forgiveness fails because those who might pronounce it are no longer living. Marsden in Strange Interlude (1926-27) reflects on the memory of his dying father; Dion Anthony remembers his mother's silent corpse; Jamie Tyrone, in A Moon for the Misbegotten, is forever haunted by that vision of his mother, looking with unforgiving eyes from her death bed. However much they would like to have forgiveness, it is impossible for them to hear it, and so they do not have it. It simply cannot be conjured up by the sinner himself: it must be proclaimed. If the confession is real, the absolution must also be real. Never are the confessions imagined--they are made. Neither can the pardon be imagined, it must be pronounced. An unspoken feeling of forgiveness cannot suffice, and the sinner cannot speak that word of forgiveness for his pardoner. In an age when a biblical and truly meaningful emphasis is being placed on the concept of kerygma, it is not enough to know of the presence of Lordship; it is the pardon his presence brings that is still the need of modern man. However antiquated the notion of forgiveness might seem, if pictures of man's situation, his dilemma, as are found in literature and abound in O'Neill, reflect anything of man's needs, they express the never-ending search for genuine

pronouncements of forgiveness.

If forgiveness is to occur, the grace should not demean. Patronizing pardon can only create resentment in the forgiven, and it might be said his last state could be worse than the first. Such a problem seems to exist in the impasse that keeps O'Neill's characters from experiencing a forgiveness greater than human pardon. Especially with relation to the complex identification that exists between mothers and the Mother of God, there would appear to be insurmountable obstacles that keep the characters from ever realizing more than human pardon. That which constitutes one such barrier is the subordinating place that is assumed by the one who receives the forgiveness. It is demeaning to be pardoned. Yet, the plays suggest a remarkable truth about forgiveness that they never use to greatest advantage in the search for a fuller forgiveness. The human forgiveness that does occur in the plays, as, for example, in Long Day's Journey, seems possible only as wronged and wrong-doer are able to meet on a common level. While the difference that could demean remains, forgiveness is impossible. But when they see each other as equals, the forgiveness occurs. It was necessary for Tyrone to tell that overworked story of his youth not as a lecture to a wastrel son but as a confession of weakness, before Edmund could understand his father, as he had never understood him before. It was then that, with this understanding, pardon could occur. Jamie goes much deeper in humbling himself in his confession before Edmund, in spite of Jamie's drunkenness and rancor, the love of Edmund for Jamie is very real to the end. It would seem to be a meaningful conclusion from this, that forgiveness can find better expression on a horizontal plane than on a vertical plane, a truth that

is at the very center of the Christ-myth, but one that comes through so poorly in the Catholicism through which alone O'Neill knew of Christianity. That he humbled himself and came as Son of Man is the enabling act that makes forgiveness possible in the Christian revelation, and it is that truth that must ever be latched onto in order to prevent a demeaning forgiveness that almost defies man to reject it.

It is undeniably difficult to express truths about the gift of God in the context of a godless world. Forgiveness--grace--as the greatest of the divine gifts, surely meets with many problems in the works of one who had tried so hard to write of this godless world--however unsuccessful and unconvincing his attempts at ridding his world of god. The striking thing about O'Neill's world is its proximity to the central truths about forgiveness in the Christian message. At the heart of the human behavior of O'Neill's characters stands ambivalence, the love-hate relationship they bear for others. It is this ambivalence that must be seen as the primary polarity of the plays. The cosmic sense of polarity grows out of it: humans who populate O'Neill's world do not reflect the cosmos; it is rather the universe that is the human situation writ large. Alienation, therefore, is never really total; its opposite is simply never really realized. Man is always balanced between love and hate, always on the verge of being loved, on the verge of being forgiven. But he does not really see a higher kind of ambivalence, one described by Christian theology as simul justus et peccator. "Even the saint remains a sinner and needs forgiveness and even the sinner is a saint in so far as he stands under divine forgiveness. If the saint receives forgive-

ness, his rejection of it remains ambiguous."³ As the actions of the characters reflect this polarity through their love-hate, they reflect how very near the concept of forgiveness in Christianity the playwright really was. It would seem he was so near that which ultimately eluded him.

A final image presents itself out of O'Neill's world, one which expresses this failure of anything more than a human pardon. It is the fellowship of the damned, that company which abounds in the plays. It is their common lot, and there is no uncertainty about their position. Aware that they do not belong, frustrated in their attempts to do so, they end amid that sorry lot the playwright chose to title the *Misbegotten*. They are not unlike the people who people the modern world, and the all-too-common assumption of theology that modern man is too blasé to appreciate his need for redemption could be ignoring the private worlds in which he lives, worlds in which there is carried on a desperate quest for a relationship that is never attained. External attitude can easily mask the inner turmoil. It is the glory of an artist to be able to re-create that world for all to see, even if such creative act should expose his own anxious soul to all eyes.

The artist has paid his price and offers his vision of the world to those who have to some degree followed him. The modern artist of our world under judgment has exposed his nerves and heart to the fury and desolation of these decades, and can provide meaning for those who have the same initiation.⁴

³Paul Tillich, Systematic Theology (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), III, 408.

⁴Amos Wilder, Theology and Modern Literature (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1958), p. 10.

These images of mercy in O'Neill deserve the serious consideration of theological criticism. While his aesthetic world grew from the private longings and demands of the artist's own soul, it would appear that these wants are widely shared by modern man. To heed what the playwright says of that modern man deprived of his gods, yet yearning for a renewal of lost relationships, is to hear the wishes of man today.

For that which is most needed, I believe, is for theological interpreters to keep the Church alive to what in the nature of its own faith requires it to be attentive to all the somber reports and prophecies and maledictions that the arts in our time are writing.⁵

A world in which forgiveness--and a greater than human forgiveness at that--is the chief object of man's quest is a world that invites our serious attention.

⁵Nathan A. Scott, Jr., The Broken Center (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966), p. 211.

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